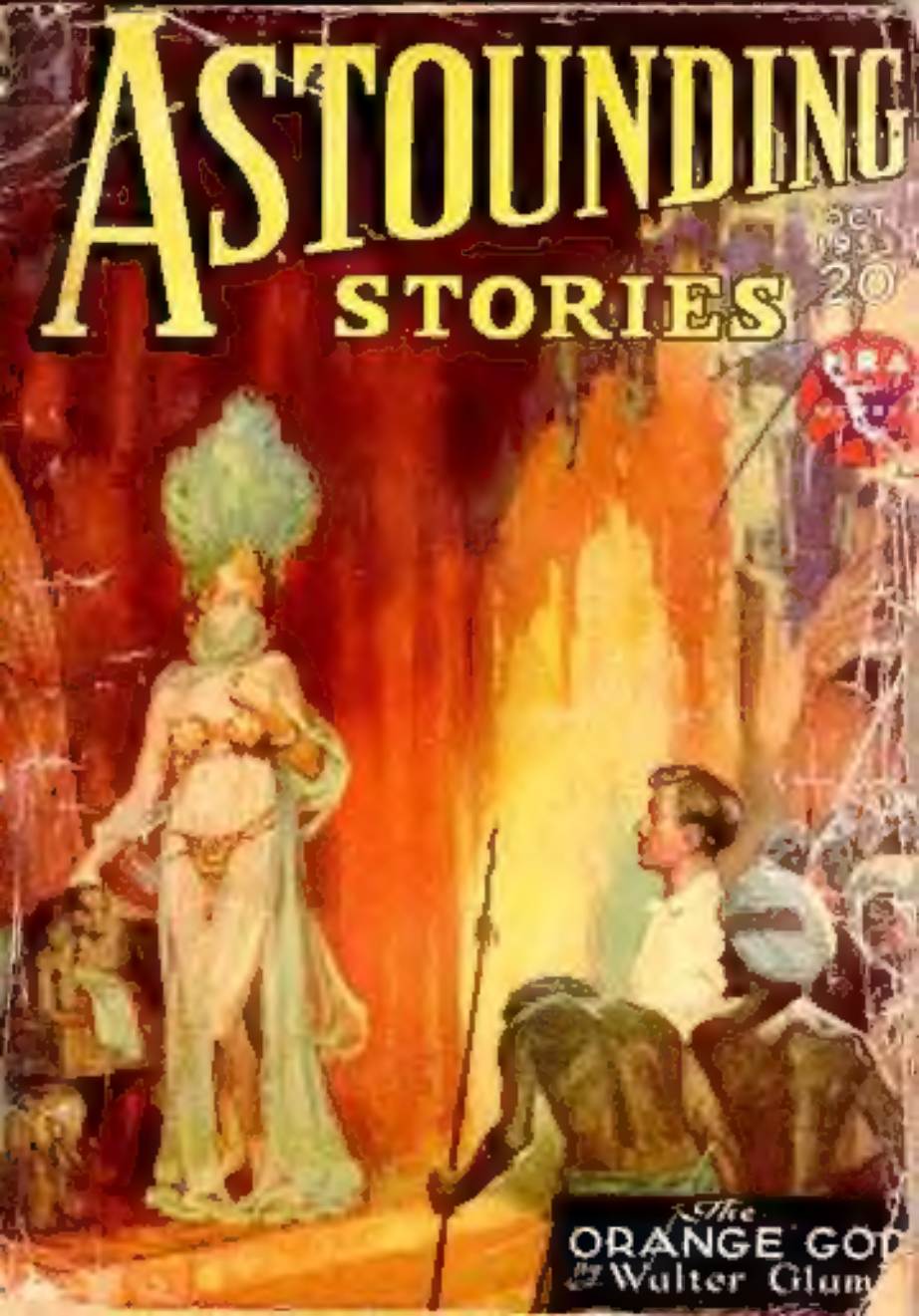
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The
ORANGE GOD
By Walter Glum

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The Orange God

by Walter Glamis

It was the figure in the center that drew his gaze.

THE BAGDAD-CALCUTTA mail was less than an hour out of Peshawar when the storm came. It was inexplicable—this storm. One moment ten thousand square miles of Indian plain and shaggy, snow-humped Himalayas seethed under a copper sun; the next, a wall of darkness swept out of the east, blotting out sky and mountain and plain as though they had ceased to exist. The fast-flying ship seemed suspended in a lightless void; the spinning earth beneath was

gone; the sun above erased. Even the motor's familiar roar was oddly hushed in the sudden quiet.

"Damn!" said Saunders, the pilot, and groped for the light switch. The instrument panel glowed into feeble illumination, as if it, too, were oppressed by the blackness. Two heads bent over simultaneously to stare at the gauges. Saunders, leathery and dour from too much solo flying, and Ward Bayley, the American passen-

ger from Peshawar for the last leg of the trip.

"Queer, isn't it?" muttered Saunders, startled, but not yet afraid, as he jerked the plane upward in an attempt to clear the strange pall. The instruments seemed to be working all right.

But Bayley's face showed white in the dim, reflected glow.

"Not scared, are you?" asked Saunders, his voice edged with contempt. "We'll get out of it soon." He opened the throttle another notch.

"A little," the American admitted calmly. "I've heard rumors about this from the hill tribes on the Tibetan border; that's why I was in a hurry to reach Calcutta to consult with——"

The instrument board blanked out suddenly; the motor sputtered once and died. The plane did not seem to be moving; all around was black nothingness. Saunders swore and wrestled with the controls.

"Look!" came Bayley's voice.

Far in the distance, a million miles away, it seemed, a tiny pinprick of light stabbed the world. It danced up and down, like a pith ball on a jet of water; then it, too, went out. A moment later it reappeared, steady and fixed; and as the fascinated watchers strained aching eyeballs, it elongated swiftly like a traveling rocket, straight up, and up, and up—a shaft of orange light that flamed clear-etched in the void, cut off beneath where the earth might be if the earth still existed, and extending upward to an infinitude where alien universes once had form and substance.

Saunders was afraid now, horribly so. He could not see his companion. The plane, the world, had come to an end in everything but that endless column of light.

"God!" It was his only word. Bayley did not speak at all. He crouched grimly in the cockpit, waiting.

Then came the storm.

The ship was caught in a blast of overwhelming sound. It whirled and whirled around in dizzying circles, while the two men held on with a grip of death. The keel shuddered once, and the rudderless plane leaped forward, faster and faster, until the tremendous acceleration pressed unbearably upon the limbs and hearts of the crouching pair. The invisible wind screamed and howled; the plane fled faster and ever faster, straight for the motionless shaft of fire.

How long it lasted, Bayley was never to know. It might have been minutes, or hours, or days, even. The plane took a final great leap, and was immersed in the orange glare. A split second of dazzling comprehension, a strange look of exaltation on Saunders's prosaic face, and darkness again as the ship hurtled clear. Bayley tried to hold on to what he had seen, what he had understood, but the plane was dropping now, and the memory fled into the pit of his stomach. There was a quick, ripping sound, a crash, and Bayley's head collided violently with something hard.

He awoke—it might have been seconds later, it might have been hours—with a sharp pain in his left shoulder, and a dull throb to his head. His eyes opened unsteadily, and saw—nothing. The orange pillar of flame was gone, the storm was over; only blackness and thick silence brooding over chaos. He moved. There was jagged hardness beneath, rock and splintered fragments of the plane. Twinges of fire streaked through his shoulder.

"Saunders!" he called weakly.

The sound of his voice drummed in his ears. There was no answer. The pilot was dead, or still unconscious. Bayley closed his eyes wearily against the unbearable dark. Something rustled, something dry and crackly. He forced his lids open again. Nothing! The sound ceased.

A shriek tore jaggedly through his failing consciousness, cleared his head of the groping pain like a douche of cold water. He thrust himself upright with a superhuman effort. The shriek was repeated. A woman's voice in the last extremity of terror! The clogging veil split open in a long gash, revealing a mountainside in weird half light. A girl crouched against a huge rock, her hand outthrust in an agony of horror, every limb instinct with unutterable fear. Her face could not be seen.

She shrieked a third time, and Bayley staggered to his feet, ripping his side unheeded against a jutting strut. He took a wavering step forward, when the walls of the darkness rushed soundlessly together, blotting out mountainside and girl and the accents of horror as if they had never been. The world was void of light and movement once again.

Bayley stood rooted.

"Saunders!" he shouted, and the sound mocked him. Was he, Bayley, dead, too, and all this but a dream of the beyond? Terror flooded him; strange terror he had never known in a long, adventurous life. Something made a stealthy *pad-pad* close by. He started to run, stumbling, crashing, in the impenetrable blackness. The *pad-pad* behind him quickened and grew in intensity. He was being pursued. He ran on blindly. They were gaining on him. He tried a last desperate spurt, and his foot slipped. He was falling. He thrust his arms out wildly, caught at a projection, swung precariously a moment, and lost his hold. Down again into chaos, until something came up with a thud, and the blackness without gushed into his brain.

When Bayley recovered consciousness it was night—normal, natural night, with stars and a dim sliver of moon overhead. A great thirst tormented him; his left shoulder was stiff and caked, and his head ached oddly. He tried to move, and almost went toppling into the abyss. One leg was dangling clear. Clawing awkwardly, he managed to pull himself back to safety. For a moment he lay panting; then he looked cautiously.

He was perched amid the rotted roots of a tree that had long since whirled into the tremendous depths below. It was a sheer precipice; the feeble starlight disclosed no bottom. Bayley shuddered as he thought of what might have happened had he not caught in the matted roots. He looked upward.

The lip of the cliff slanted backward from where he lay, not more than fifteen feet above. He had not fallen far. The slope could be negotiated. Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself up over the roots, testing each hold with infinite caution, pausing when a stone dislodged beneath his unwary feet to hear the sound of its thud at the bottom of the gorge. But no smallest noise came up through the still night. At last he stood at the top, disheveled, clothes slashed and torn, blood caked stiff.

What had happened? Where was he? Where was Saunders? It had been noon when they left Peshawar; now, by the stars, it seemed close to midnight. What had caused that strange, weird storm, that supernat-

ural column of light? He had been pursued, too. Did those invisible padding feet belong to animals or men? The girl, disclosed a moment by a rift in the black curtain, and swallowed up forever—what did it all mean? The questions beat furiously through his mind and evoked no answers.

Force of habit dictated his next moves. All his life he had wandered in the out-places of the world, amid strange tribes and savage customs, and caution was second nature to him. He dropped quickly behind a huge boulder that teetered on the edge, so that no hostile eye could spy him in the shimmer of the stars. Now he was able to take stock of his surroundings.

He was on the outthrust of a huge mountain, perched seemingly at the edge of the world. The ground descended slightly away from the cliff, then rose again in a long slope of a thousand feet, and ended abruptly in a towering granite wall, whose top was lost in the thin darkness. All around, to north, east, and south, tumbled mountain range on range, higher, more breathtaking than the Himalayas themselves. To the west, however, there was nothing; a pool of blackness that disclosed neither land nor sea.

Bayley shivered. There was only one range of mountains in the entire world that compared with this—the fabulous, sinister, almost unknown Gangi Mountains of northern Tibet. That meant that they had been swept a thousand miles east and north, over the Himalayas themselves, into a land of jealous seclusion, of strange lama rites, of unknown horrors. He would never get out alive!

His searching eyes raked the rumpled terrain of the shallow valley. There was nothing—no sign of the wrecked plane or of Saunders. A black cloud passed suddenly over the horned moon; its shadow raced gigantically over the valley, straight up the precipitous slope on the other side. Bayley's gaze followed it involuntarily. In spite of his caution, a low exclamation escaped him.

Something was moving in the heart of the shadow, a confused, wavering blob that seemed to be climbing the long slope. The cloud over the moon veered sharply to the east, and the obedient ground shadow moved with it. A procession disclosed itself momentarily—a long, threadlike movement of toiling doll figures. They were carrying something. Almost at the same time, toward the westerly slope, another group dissociated from the shadows, converging at an angle with the first. They, too, were carrying a burden. Then the cloud shifted back again; and the streaking shadow made one vast blob on the mountainside, blotting out all sight and sound in darkness as palpable as that first weird storm.

But Bayley had seen enough. It was not merely the processions. There had been something else. High up on the precipitous wall, the focal point of the converging parties, his eye had caught a light, a steady pin-prick of orange flame that seemed to emanate from the black mouth of a cave. The heart of the mystery of the night's strange, untoward events was there.

Bayley felt grimly for the gun under his torn, dirtied jacket. It was still in its holster, unharmed in the smash. He stepped out from the shadow of the protecting rock, and started down into the valley, gliding from rock to rock with the practiced ease of an Indian on the trail, careful to make no sound in his passage, merging indistinguishably with the blurred outlines of the rub-

bly steep. Whatever unholy mess was brewing, he was going to be present. There was Saunders, the pilot—he had been monosyllabic and dour enough, offended at the American the Peshawar officials had thrust upon him, but he was a white man. There was the girl, too. Her face had been hidden, but he was sure she was no Tibetan. Those stories of the frightened hill tribes came home to roost now; tales of strange rites and of a stranger god whom the lamas were worshiping in the hidden recesses of innermost Tibet.

He was past the valley now, and climbing steadily. There was no further sign of the two weird processions, but the orange flame gleamed steadily far above. The moon was gone; the cloud was spreading and blotting out the stars one by one. An hour of tortuous climbing brought him to the end of the trail. The granite wall of the mountain loomed perpendicularly overhead, a smooth, towering massif, unscalable, insurmountable. The unwinking flame had snuffed suddenly out.

Bayley searched desperately about. He must find a way in a hurry, before the shadows crept on him. Where had the processions gone; how had they scaled the tremendous cliff? There was not even a single hold on that smooth, vertical surface. The blackness was closer now, coming up in a wall of dead lightlessness. A last swift, despairing glance, and Bayley was engulfed. He seemed suddenly bodiless; a floating brain in a sea of nothingness.

But before the last sightless blotting out, he had seen something. Two huge boulders like giant guards at a portal, and a black hole that yawned between. It was only a dozen feet away, and he was facing it.

Without hesitation, he started forward, right arm extended, eyes closed to avoid the uncanny dark. Pebbles made odd noises beneath his feet. Then his outstretched arm hit with a thud. He felt around the smooth stone. He was on the verge of the opening. He paused a moment, cursing the fact that he had no flash. How deep was the orifice; was it a sheer drop or a path? There was no way of telling.

Bayley took a deep breath and inched his way in. It descended, but gently. A cold wind was blowing steadily outward. He kept close to the invisible side of the tunnel. It was going upward now. The wall seemed to angle sharply, and far ahead was a pale glimmer. There was an orange tinge to it. Bayley sucked his breath in with a gusty murmur, made sure his gun was easy-sliding in its holster.

There was light enough now to move a little faster. But the American redoubled his caution. He crept slowly along the wall. There was something artificial about its smooth, unbroken surface, about the well-worn condition of the path beneath.

The orange glow ahead grew stronger in intensity. There was movement beyond, and a confused murmur of sound. Bayley had his gun out, and his caution increased. He seemed but a shadow creeping along the wall. The flaming orifice ahead expanded; the murmurs took on shape and form. A chanting pulsed and fell. Drums throbbed in staccato unison.

Luckily the wall curved slightly as it reached the opening. Bayley threw himself down flat and wriggled forward, keeping to the curve. The sounds grew louder, the glow brighter. He inched his head warily

around the bend, his gun extended a bit, ready to shoot at the first cry of alarm. The scene sprang full-orbed into view.

Bayley almost cried out, though his life hung by a thread. Never in all his wanderings had he come across such a sinister, blood-chilling sight.

The great cavern, hollowed out to the shape of a perfect hemisphere, was aglow. Seated in concentric circles, like an audience in a stadium, were hundreds of Tibetans, lamas by the red robes of them, all facing inward toward the center, their dark faces aflame with the fires of fanaticism. Within the inner circle weaved a dance, red-clad figures swaying and drumming on tiny drums. A lama in a yellow robe, emblematic of a high order, face uplifted, back to Bayley, was chanting. *"Om mani padme hum hri!"* Bayley recognized that much; it was the sacred sentence of Lamaism.

But it was not the yellow lama, the drummers, or the crowded priests, that drew his startled gaze. It was the figure in the very center, the cynosure, the point of adoration of the assembled monks. Bayley had all he could do to stifle the shriek that rose to his lips, to control his limbs from jerking upright and carrying him in a mad race from that cavern.

A huge globe of crystal poised lightly on the ground. It was hollow, thin-walled, like a bubble. Within its clear depths, at the very center, unsupported, floated a figure. It was not a man. Bayley was positive of that—yet it held some vague resemblance to the human form. The body was elongated, and deep-orange in color. Sinuous appendages that might have been arms and legs hung limply down. The head was round and bald, and Bayley caught two round, unwinking orbs staring straight outward. The eyes, if eyes they were, were not malign. On the contrary, their inscrutable depths seemed filled with passionless wisdom, with infinite knowledge. Bayley had seen plenty of the leering, hideous idols the Tibetans worshiped in their religion. This was indubitably none of them. And it was *alive!*

The sphere glowed outwardly with a colorful iridescence, and immediately behind was the opening to the outer world through which Bayley had first noticed the flame.

Three figures lay bound on the ground before the globe. Bayley was just able to see them through a gap in the serried ranks. At the risk of discovery, he raised his head. His heart gave a great bound. One of them was a naked Tibetan, browned and dirty, his scrawny limbs trembling uncontrollably against the cords. The second was Saunders, his clothes in tatters, a red gash across his forehead. His dour Scotch features were more sullen than ever, eyes upturned to the great living idol. The third was a woman—the girl who had shrieked on the mountainside. She, too, was bound, prone on the ground. She was dressed in mannish clothes, breeches and puttees, and she wore a leather jacket. Her profile was pale and pure. A strand of glossy black hair escaped from under a close leather cap. She was not shrieking now, but Bayley caught a glimpse of even teeth clenched over a lower lip before he sank back to his hiding place.

The American's first impulse was to turn and run; his second to open fire. The first was rejected even before it was fully formed; the second was suicidal, and could achieve nothing. Yet something hideous

was about to take place; of that he was sure. Wild thoughts flashed through his brain of that strange figure in the globe, of the weird ceremony.

But before he could evolve any plan, the chanting ceased, the drums stopped their monotonous throb. A hush fell over the cavern. The figure did not move, yet Bayley had a horrible intuition that it was speaking. Queer sounds beat within his mind, the tongue, the language, was unknown. It was not Tibetan, it had no counterpart on earth. Yet the Tibetan lama seemed to understand. He snapped out orders. Two red-clad natives stepped forward. They lifted the captive Tibetan, their countryman, high above their heads, while he struggled and twisted in his bonds. Bayley could see him plainly now. His hollow, dark features worked convulsively, foam dribbled from his lips, and scream after scream ripped through the stillness.

The supporting natives suddenly loosed their hold, and the unfortunate captive remained suspended in mid-air. His struggles ceased, he was rigid. The eyes of the ephered being turned to him. To Bayley, crouched and panting, there seemed a cool understanding in their depths. A bubble formed around the suspended Tibetan, a thin-walled globe. The light glowed stronger. It beat out of the opening into the void! Bayley had seen a star a moment before. Now a column of light extended out and up—up to infinity.

The sphere with its inclosed prisoner trembled and moved. It slid out along the orange column, as though it were a greased way. Higher and higher it fled, until it was a tiny speck in the glow, then it disappeared. Bayley again had that wild impulse to flee. This was not of the world of men and natural forces. But he was held, taut, cold, senses attuned like a fine violin.

The girl was being lifted!

She did not struggle. But, as she was turned in the movement, her finely chiseled face disclosed to Bayley blue-black eyes, large with repressed fear. A thoroughbred! Saunders, the dour, hard-bitten Scotsman, lapsed from his sullen silence—violently. He heaved at his bonds, his tongue loosened with a flow of hard, sulphurous profanity that would have warmed Bayley's heart under any other circumstances.

"Leave that girl be, you heathen swine!" he barked.

No one paid any attention to him, least of all, the orange creature of the globe.

The girl was halfway up when Bayley went into action. He flung himself erect, took careful aim, and shot at the great sphere. The roar of the .44 crashed, echoing through the cavern. Bayley raced forward, gun in hand.

At once the great sphere went black, and the entire cavern plunged into thick darkness. Bayley had a quick glimpse of startled lamas clambering to their feet. Then he was in the thick of a press of shouting, milling, sweaty, invisible bodies.

Left elbow stiffly advanced, gun clubbed, Bayley plunged on his way, straight for the spot where he had last seen the sphere and the bound victims. Cries of alarm gave way to screams of pain as he battered a path through the shaken mob. Hands clutched at his invisible progress, but he shook them off, and the gun butt rose and fell with deadly precision. Then he was through into a clearing. He stepped

short. This must be the circle that had held the sphere. He groped around, finger on trigger for another shot. Back and forth he ranged in the blackness, arm blindly extended, while the clamor around rose to a solid roar of rage. A torch flamed in the distance. It was moving swiftly up the passageway. He must work fast before the light came, before the enraged lamas could locate him.

But the sphere was gone! There was no question about it. He ran in quick circles, and found nothing but thick darkness. The torch was nearing, bobbing and flickering with the speed of its carrier. Forgetting the mystery of the sphere, Bayley thrust desperately at the ground. He must free the girl first, then Saunders. But where was the girl? He was sure she had fallen somewhere around this particular spot, but his frantic groping disclosed nothing.

Just then the runner with the flaming wood burst into the cavern. A howl of triumph rose from a hundred throats. There was a rush of fantastic red figures to the area of illumination. Then the torch commenced bobbing forward. Its smoky illumination cast but a feeble light of long, flickering shadows, and the blood-lusting lamas who crowded in its wake seemed like a pack of demons on the trail of a damned soul. It wouldn't take long to discover the intruder.

The girl, like the sphere, had disappeared. Bayley paused. He could not orient himself to find Saunders. Seconds were precious now. A voice came up almost at his feet.

"Whoever you are, devil or man," it said in angry tones, "cut these cords so I can die with my fists going."

Bayley grinned and bent over, his hand questing. A large, wriggling body was underneath. He whipped out his penknife, flipped open the blade, slashed at interminable cords.

"Hurry, man!" the invisible voice expostulated. "They're coming fast."

Bayley sliced the last knot just as the searching, sooty flare caught at his bent form. The lamas saw him almost simultaneously. A howl of frenzied execration burst from the Tibetans. Arms upraised, they rushed forward. Steel glittered in brown fists.

Bayley ripped frantically, tugged Saunders to his feet. The pilot could hardly stand, so weak was he from the long confinement.

"Got a gun?" the American whispered fiercely. Saunders nodded. The sweat was pale on his brow, but he got at it somehow. His voice grew strong.

"Let the beggars have it!" he shouted.

The two guns flamed together. Steel-jacketed death tore through the massed onrushing ranks; the heavy slugs slammed and crashed through half a dozen brown-skinned bodies. The roars of hatred mingled with screams of pain and the groans of the dying.

"Think we can fight our way through the passage?" Saunders grunted as they fired again.

"Not a chance," Bayley said. "We'd be sliced for sure. Watch out! Here they come!"

The lamas had recovered from the first shock, and were coming with a deadly rush. The long, keen knives gleamed wickedly in the uncertain light.

Bayley had had experience with religious fanatics before.

"Can't stop them now," he said to Saunders as they pumped bullets into the compact mass as fast as

triggers could jerk. Gaps appeared and filled up almost immediately. Suddenly the Scotsman stopped.

"No more bullets," he said casually. "It's been a pleasure to meet you. Good-by."

Bayley had two bullets left. The lamas were almost on them. He could hear the whistling of their breaths, see the glare in their eyeballs. The knives were plunging downward. Saunders had his gun clubbed, ready to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Bayley took a last careful aim and fired. In the background, the bearer of the torch howled dismally, and the smoking wood dashed to the ground, scattered sparks, and was extinguished. The cavern was in pitch darkness again.

"This way, Saunders," Bayley shouted, and threw himself sideways. A knife ripped down through his coat. Something red-hot seared his side, and warm fluid ran in a smear. The next instant he was the center of a struggling, howling mass. Luckily, in the dark no one knew his neighbor. The lamas were slashing at each other indiscriminately. Bayley tried to break through the weaving horde, but there was another rush, and he was borne backward, fighting desperately with fist and gun butt.

Back and back he went, ducking, weaving, feeling sudden stabs of pain as knives slashed at him and skinny hands gashed with razor-sharp nails. There was cold air on his back, a steady, strong wind. Bayley knew what that meant, his brow beaded with sudden horror. He tried to smash his way clear, but a solid wall of flesh pressed him remorselessly back.

Far away he heard a cry. It sounded like Saunders's voice, shouting words that were indistinguishable. Then something struck him—the concerted heave of fifty lamas. He was hurled back. His left foot tried to plant itself, found nothing. The wind was cold and dawn-fresh on his brow. Bayley staggered, clutched desperately. Then both feet went over, and he was falling. He had been pushed out of the cave opening, high up on the smooth, perpendicular wall of the mountain.

SAUNDERS found himself separated from the American almost immediately as the light crashed out. He heard Bayley's shout to follow him, but he was in the middle of as pretty a dog fight as he had ever experienced during the War. He smashed out with fist and gun, heard the grunts of pain, felt a knife wound in his shoulder, broke clear and dashed for what he thought was the direction of the tunnel.

He ran headlong into a wall, and the breath was knocked out of him. To the other side he heard the thuds and shouts of battle. He groped along, trying to find the path, when something gave way suddenly. He called out Bayley's name just as the wall opened. He found himself thrown into an irregular chamber in the rock, dimly illuminated with unseen light. Saunders shook his head and came to his feet with a bound. The wall had glided smoothly into position behind him. He was cut off from Bayley.

A whistling sound made him turn around sharply, and duck at the same time. That saved his life. A knife blade ruffled his hair with the speed of its flight, and ground with a dull thud into the wall beyond.

The lama in the yellow robe was standing close to a fat, obscene, pot-bellied idol that represented the Tibetans' degraded caricature of

Buddha. He gibbered foul phrases as he plucked frantically at his sleeve, where another knife lay hidden.

Saunders's eyes slid past him to the mysterious girl, sitting rigidly upright on a cushioned dais next to the idol. She was not bound, and her eyes were open, but they had the peculiar stare of a person under the influence of drugs. Saunders's gaze jerked back to the lama. His arm was bent back! It held a knife.

The pilot raised his gun.

"Drop it," he said sharply. The gun was empty, and Saunders knew it.

The bluff worked, but in surprising fashion. The steel blade clattered to the ground, and the lama moved like a striking snake. He scooped up the immobile girl with one hand; the other went behind him. The Scotsman jerked forward with a cry of alarm, but it was too late. The huge belly of the idol swung open on hinges, disclosing a hollow interior. The Tibetan monk glided backward in a single flowing motion, the girl in his arms, and the idol closed with a brazen clang.

Saunders came crashing into a metallic, rounded idol just as mocking laughter floated hollowly up to him. He glared at the obscene visage, raised a huge fist to crash into its stomach, but withheld his blow. He would only break his hand. There must be a button concealed somewhere on the bulging belly.

He was fumbling clumsily when another sound burst on him. He whirled. The secret entrance from the greater cavern was open, and a horde of red lamas came pouring through.

THE AIR rushed upward as Bayley fell through the void. He knew it was a good thousand feet to the long, irregular slope beneath, yet he felt strangely calm. Events of over three decades of existence flashed through his mind as he dropped. The exploration of hitherto unknown portions of Afghanistan and the Gobi; the acclaim of learned societies; the last trek out of Nepal; the rumors of the god that had come to Tibet; the determination to seek him out after consulting with a learned friend in Calcutta who knew all the intricacies of Lamaism; the courteous air official at Peshawar; the dour pilot, glum at the thought of flying company; the strange storm; the god himself; and —the girl he had seen twice.

It was on the thought of her that he felt the sudden slackening of his speed. He looked upward. The orange sphere dazzled against the pale dawn light; the stars were burning low. Even as he looked, a cylinder of flame darted down toward him. It caught him in mid-flight, spun him round and round. Then he felt himself come to a breaking halt, hesitate, and start to rise again. He was being lifted through the air toward the waiting globe.

MARIAN TEMPLE came dizzily out from under the influence of the drug. By a tremendous effort of will she managed to force open leaden eyelids. She found herself lying in a luxuriously furnished room, the walls of which were covered with Ispahan carpets of intricate weave. The floor was piled thick, and the odor of incense hung dense in the chamber. At the farther end the yellow lama, his back turned, was engaged in mixing something in a brass mortar with a stone pestle.

The girl tried to rise, but the leaden weight of lethargic limbs held her down. She closed her eyes

again to clear her head, then reopened them. Life was slowly flowing back into her numbed body.

The past twelve hours had been filled with horrors. Her lovely face, with the eyes that had been the toast of New York, was pallid now, drawn with fine lines of unending terror. From the time that their round-the-world plane had been drawn into the mysterious black storm over southern Siberia, she had not known a moment's peace.

This, she reflected bitterly, was the result of trying to be different. Bored to tears by the dull round of New York's gayety, she had snatched at Maxton's offer to take her as the first passenger on a globe-girdling trip. The papers had featured it—"Society Girl Seeks New Thrills."

She had them. Poor Maxton was dead under the crashed plane. The fantastic figures in red had risen out of the earth to seize her! the strange column of flame beat around her. The rest was mounting terror! The weird rites; the god in the crystal; the bound figures beside her; the sudden appearance of the white man. Then the battle—a bony arm lifting her, the sweetish capsule pressed between her lips, and unconsciousness.

She felt better now. She moved a leg cautiously, and the warm blood raced through it. She glanced around the room. The four walls stared back, unrelieved by door or other opening. Still, there must be one. The lama's back was still turned. She looked wildly around. There was no weapon handy. Yes, there was!—a small ointment jar of exquisite workmanship that stood on a pedestal at the head of her couch.

The girl slowly reached over for it, trying to make no sound. The grind of the pestle in the mortar filled in the rhythm of her movements. With infinite care she raised herself, raised the fragile jar. She hurled it.

As the missile left her fingers, the monk dodged suddenly. The precious vase thudded into a rare Ispahan, shivered into a thousand fragments. Yellow ointment streaked the reddish surface of the rug.

The lama whirled around, a scornful sneer on his brown parchment face. The skin was tight and smooth over high cheek bones; the lean, high nose was quite unlike the usual squatness of the Tibetans. His black eyes flashed commandingly. There was a knife in his hand.

In despair the girl looked around for another weapon.

"I shall have to kill you if you persist," the monk spoke surprisingly. "See!" He raised the keen blade and made a significant gesture across his throat.

The girl fell back.

"You speak English?" she panted.

He bowed mockingly. "Among many other tongues. I saw every move you made in here." He pointed to a tiny mirror set in the wall directly above the mortar.

Marian Temple stood erect. If the man knew English, then——

"What do you wish of me?" she asked. "If it's ransom, my people will pay——"

The lama interrupted scornfully. "Ransom! Ha! What do I need with that trash? Bits of gold that you Westerners kill and lie and cheat over!"

The girl was forgetting her terror in her curiosity.

"You've killed, too," she said pointedly.

"Yes, but for a different, a holier purpose. For power! Power over

all men—the only real thing in a world of illusions."

"Why was I taken captive, then?" Marian asked.

The yellow monk smiled grimly.

"You will be the instrument of my power," he said.

She stared at him aghast. He did not seem insane.

"How?"

He threw up an arm.

"The Buddhas of Lamaism are outworn. Every lamasery has one; there is no merit in them. You are beneath one now. Can he breathe, or speak, or move? He is but an idol of wood and precious metal. I—I shall set you up, a warm, breathing, living goddess. You will be decked in gorgeous robes and gems. You will smile. The people will see—and adore."

Marian Temple tried to envisage herself as a goddess. Somehow she felt an odd sense of relief.

"Then the strange being in the crystal was just a mummery?" She breathed freely. That scene had lain like a hidden pool of terror in the back of her mind. "The whole ceremony was a fraud?"

The change in the lama astounded her. The arrogant, ambitious monk shrank fearfully away; his features worked horribly. There was a light froth on his lips.

"He—he was a god!" The words burst from him unwillingly. He was suddenly shrunken and old.

"Nonsense." Marian tried to put a positiveness into her voice that she did not feel.

The yellow lama glared at her. For one awful second she thought he was going to plunge the knife into her bosom. Then the words flowed.

"He came from above, I tell you, clothed in the globe and in light. Here to our monastery. The red monks bowed. I refused, and he struck me down. He ordered us to do his bidding. He spoke no language, yet I understood. I hated the god, but I dared not disobey."

Suddenly he laughed, mockingly, horribly.

"You are right," he told the terrified girl. "He is no god; he is but some mummery. The white man's bullet destroyed him." He advanced sardonically. "Goddess! You shall be worshiped, and I shall be the power in the land!"

The girl shrank back as far as she could. He came closer; she could feel his rapid breathing.

It commenced as a rumble and ended in an ear-splitting crash that sounded as if the mountain had been split asunder. The room heaved and rocked; the carpets fell violently off the walls. Luckily Marian was already flat against the wall; she was thrown, but not badly hurt. The yellow monk, however, was caught in mid-stride. He lay huddled against the farther side. The contents of the mortar, a greenish powder, spilled over his immobile face. Blood trickled slowly from the left eye.

The roaring ceased. The room trembled once more, as though the mountain had given itself a final shake, and there was silence.

The girl arose unsteadily, panting. Now, if ever, was her chance to escape. She took one step forward when a voice slashed through her brain. It was no outward sound, yet it said commandingly, imperatively *"Come!"*

There was no denying the summons. She felt an irresistible impulse to obey. Her feet started to walk mechanically. The body of the lama rose slowly, rigidly, the green poison flecking his lips. It moved forward with deliberate, rigid steps.

He was dead—she was sure of that—the eyes were the eyes of a dead man, and the pallor of the face was a corpse pallor. Yet the dead man heard and obeyed!

She may have screamed. She was not quite certain of just what took place. The horror mercifully blotted out part of her memory. But she, too, went ahead, in back of the dead monk. Without a falter, he ascended a winding passageway, the girl directly behind. He pressed unerringly on the right spring within the hollow of the idol. The brazen belly opened outward, and they passed through—the dead man and the live girl.

The chamber of the idol was a veritable devil's caldron. The mountain-quake had sent huge fragments of ceiling rock thudding to the ground. The Buddha's head had broken off jaggedly at the neck, and the lolling, painted face leered wickedly up at them. But it was the procession that startled the girl almost out of her hypnotic obedience.

The red monks were marching. The living, the wounded, the dead: with faces rigid, with movements like mechanical dolls, they filed toward the opening that led to the great cavern where the god had been. In the very center of the strange procession strode Saunders, as rigid and as staring as any. He was bleeding from a dozen wounds. The lamas had not seized him without a struggle, and his dour face was set and hard. There was no flicker of recognition in his eyes.

The girl tried to faint, but a driving force impelled her on. Dead men walked along with her, corpses that moved their limbs up and down with regular tread. The living were but little better.

"If only I could faint and shut out all these horrors!" she moaned repeatedly—and walked ahead with steady pace.

They were through the orifice, streaming into the great cavern. The place was ablaze with orange light, and in the center, lightly poised, rested the great sphere. Within its bubble clearness floated the god, the strange, elongated being with lump appendages and round, bald head. His eyes, Marian decided, had lost their inscrutability; there was a hint of weariness about them.

But more startling even than this was the sight of the stranger, the white man who had attacked the god and the lamas just as she was about to be sacrificed. He was standing close to the huge globe, nonchalantly, pistol in hand, and *grinning!* Yes, in the midst of that chamber of horrors he was grinning. A likable grin, thought Marian, the hypnotic power almost gone from her. He was tall, weathered, and lean.

The lamas, corpses and pseudo-corpses, dropped heavily to the ground, and bobbed at once to sitting positions. The girl found herself constrained downward, next to the lama in the yellow robe. The glare in his eyes was fixed, the green poison on his lips, meant for others, had served as Nemesis. She shuddered and tried to move away, but could not.

Then the god spoke. Again there was no outward sound; the bald head did not move, nor were there any lips from which speech could issue; but the girl heard and understood plainly. There was the feeling of immense boredom.

"People of earth," he said, "insects of a tiny speck in the great void—of all the inhabitants on planets and suns, you are the dullest, the slowest witted, the least impor-

tant. Sharkis will not thank me for the specimens I have returned for his curiosity. I am going. An infinity of worlds and an eternity of time await me; the very thought of your existence will be lost in the vastness. Sharkis will remember you no longer on my return. Farewell!"

The sphere glowed into a flame of orange, and the being within rotated once, slowly. Marian noted suddenly that Bayley's grim had not left him; that the gun was still in his hand.

A long, fiery cylinder extended outward like a released jack-in-the-box, through the orifice into the outer world—up through unimaginable distance to alien universes.

The sphere commenced whirling, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The strange being within was but a blur of movement. Then the rotating sphere commenced to slide up the path of light piercing the sky like a flaming sword. Out it fled into the early morning where men toiled in the accustomed fields and women went about their homely household tasks; up the shining path through the pale blue of dawn sunshine until it was only a mote of shining dust in infinity. Then it was gone. The alien being was on his far-wandering travels again.

Within the cavern, as the ambassador from Sharkis spurned the earth from under him, there was an indescribable confusion. The strange hypnosis departed suddenly, and the upheld dead went limp, sprawling into loose-limbed heaps—corpses. The odor of corruption rose like a miasma.

The living rubbed their eyes, and were suddenly awake. A united susurrous of terror burst from the lama's throats, and with one movement they cast themselves prone on the rocky floor.

"The devil was with us!" they cried, and groveled in fear.

Bayley was striding toward the girl.

"Thank heavens you are safe," he said fervently. "I'm Ward Bayley."

"I—I'm all right," she gasped, with a little shudder. "My name is Marian Temple. Please—let's get out of this horrible nightmare."

"If we can," he answered grimly. His eye roved over the prostrate horde—the dead and the living.

"Saunders!" he shouted.

A figure tried to rise, and collapsed. Bayley was there in three steps, the girl right behind him. He caught the pilot in his arms. He was bleeding profusely.

"Not hurt much," muttered the Scotsman feebly, and fainted.

Bayley spurned a prostrate monk with his foot. His gun pointed threateningly. The lama sprang to his feet. Bayley spoke rapidly in Tibetan. The red one nodded and answered in short, explosive gasps. He was respectful. The others were rising now, staring at the three white people, but making no move.

"It's all right," said Bayley to the girl. "They think we're heroes. We've saved them from the devil. Come!"

He threw the large figure of the pilot easily across his shoulder, and followed the monk. The girl walked at his side, pulling away involuntarily each time they passed a dead lama. The other monks trailed after at a respectful distance.

Through many winding passages they went, illuminated by the flare of smoky torches, until they came to the monastery at the foot of the mountain.

There, for several weeks, they rested, while Saunders mused in de-

lirium, and Bayley had his own wounds dressed. The lamas tended all three with great care; they had routed the devil himself.

When at last Saunders was well enough to travel, the monks escorted them to the border of Tibet in a closed vehicle. No white man, they insisted, had ever set foot in this forbidden territory before; there were sights and sounds to drive them mad if they came upon them unprepared. Bayley smiled thinly, and did not protest.

In the jolting half light of the shrouded cart, Saunders did an unusual thing. He betrayed curiosity.

"What," he asked, "did you do to the being in the sphere to compel his departure from the earth?"

Bayley grinned.

"It was simple," he explained. "So simple as to be almost incredible. Remember when I took a shot at him and the globe disappeared?"

The girl nodded. It had saved her life; or, rather, levitation to an unknown universe.

"I only nicked a piece out of the substance of the sphere. When the lamas had forced me over the precipice, the ambassador from Sharkis was overhead. He was foolish enough to pick me up; thought I was a good specimen to send back to his master."

The girl was listening with parted lips. Her breathing came fast.

Bayley went on. "I found myself enclosed in a tiny sphere, filled with a peculiar fluid, not air, not liquid, but strangely exhilarating. The great globe was alongside, and the orange one stared out at me. I was desperate. Might as well die now as later, I thought, and, pulling my gun, I shot deliberately through my own inclosure, directly at the larger one."

Saunders said: "Gosh, what a chance you took!"

"It was the only way," Bayley answered simply. "The bullet drilled clean. I felt the rush of rarefied cold air into my chamber. But I watched the other. Something had happened. There was fear, actual fear, in the orange one's eyes. He seemed to struggle. The hole in his sphere plugged up almost at once, but I had seen enough.

"I pointed the gun threateningly, and said aloud, in English, that I could repeat the performance indefinitely. He understood, somehow, for there came to me a plea for mercy. I granted it on conditions. I learned afterward that guns were unknown elsewhere in the universe; that in spite of his almost supernatural powers, he feared a hole in his sphere."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Our atmosphere was poison to him. The little whiff he got before he was able to plug it up almost killed him."

They rode along a while in silence.

Then Bayley chuckled softly.

Saunders stared at him gloomily. His face was normal again; that is, dour and suspicious.

"What's the joke?" he demanded.

"I just remembered," said Bayley. "That pot-shot I took at the orange one was my last bullet. My gun was empty."

by
Donald
Wandrei

He was too late! The damage was done!

A RACE Through TIME

THE RIVALRY between Warren Daniels and Webster Conning began when they were seniors at prep school and continued all through their college life at Eastern Tech. They were contrasts in everything—Daniels the evil genius ruled by personal ambition and the desire for power. Conning, who worked for the sheer joy of discovery and to aid humanity.

Daniels was a heavily built man, stocky in appearance, who had a gift for jumping to correct conclusions and letting others explain how he got there. His scientific interest, generally speaking, was medicine. He lightly referred to his field of specialization as "drugology." Antiseptics, serums, opiates, drugs, anodynes, anaesthetics—these were the allied subjects that claimed his attention. He worked hard and he worked steadily. Even those who hated him personally—and they were many—admitted his brilliance and his energy.

Conning was a different type—long, rangy, with nerves of repressed steel. He didn't jump to conclusions. When he had an idea, he worked through the logical steps toward it. He had a native gift for mathematics. He developed it, and wrote a couple of monographs along

the speculative fields popularised by Einstein and Whitehead and Russell. In addition to pure mathematics, he was absorbed in their application to the problems of physics.

The two men graduated in the same year, with a great future promised for each. And the rivalry was promptly fanned to hostility by the entrance of Ellen MacOrm. She entered their lives during their last semester, when they were taking the same course in the mathematics of parasitology. She was pretty, in a fiery and independent way. She felt sure she had a mind of her own and she was determined to lead her own life. Meanwhile, she wanted to learn medical psychology, that curious offshoot of two different sciences. Love and all that sort of thing could wait.

She had tawny hair and gray eyes, a better than average figure and a first-rate mind. Daniels and Conning both became interested, for all the good it did them. Ellen had no intention of getting married or even allowing herself to become seriously interested, for years to come. She was one of those lovely, talented, independent women who are so exasperating to know.

The rivalry deepened. If anything, Daniels seemed to have the edge, for Ellen chose to be his assistant in the private laboratory that his wealth permitted him. Conning had to stomach the irritation of visiting his antagonist's property every time he wanted to see Ellen, which was often.

Thus the silent struggle continued, a superficial atmosphere of polite sarcasm existing between the rivals, until a certain hectic evening about two years after their graduation.

Web had a date with Ellen that evening. He wasted part of it by asking her for the tenth time why she wouldn't marry him, and why, with at least a thousand other laboratories, including his own modest workshop to choose from, she had to pick that of Daniels.

"That's my affair, not yours," she fired back as usual. "I've told you before I don't care to tie myself down—not yet, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Well, just because." With which profound and illuminating answer he was forced to be content. "I'll tell you sometime."

"It may be too late," said Web abruptly.

She spun around. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Only that my old dream of conquering time is about to come true. I wanted you to share my success, but if you won't, I'll go it alone—and that means the end."

Ellen looked at him with wide, curious eyes. "I don't quite understand, Web."

"Come along and I'll show you—but promise me you'll keep this absolutely secret?"

"Of course I will!"

He had been driving her back to her rooms, which were in one wing of the enormous old mansion that did duty for Daniels, his laboratory, his servants, and his assistant. Now he turned the car around and headed for his own quarters. He drew up before a two-story frame building, with a large shed attached. Together they walked around the house and entered his workshop, which neither Ellen nor any one else save himself had ever seen.

When he turned on the lights, a gasp of mingled delight and surprise came from the girl. Her face brightened with eager curiosity as she ran forward.

Occupying almost the entire floor

of the shed was a long, torpedolike object of silvery and symmetric beauty. It flashed and shone even in the artificial light.

"Pretty, isn't she? I've named her the *Eileen*," said Web proudly. "She took a year and a half to build. But step inside and I'll show you something else."

He pressed a spot on the torpedo's side. A door swung outward, letting them into a narrow corridor. Web opened a second door and they stood inside.

"Double-walled against friction-heat and accidents," he said, as if that explained everything. He next proceeded to point out all the internal features, and how every inch of space had its purpose. Cushioned walls, oxygen apparatus, food and water concentrate, dial-board and cosmic ray-teleposition mirror, power chambers and sleeping bunks for two—an amazing total for so small a space, and yet nothing except essentials.

"Why, it's a thing of beauty in every detail!" cried Eileen as she took it all in, and then added, in a more puzzled tone: "But what's it for?"

"Time traveling," Web answered succinctly.

"Time traveling!" she echoed. "Why you must be mad! Oh—I'm sorry, Web. I didn't mean to put it that way. But you know that that old dream of a machine to travel through time was based on a fallacy."

"Sure it was," he conceded blithely.

"Time is an abstract idea which has no physical existence. It is a concept, nothing more. The people who used to talk and write about time traveling machines made the mistake of trying to turn an abstraction into a concrete reality. You can think of time as a dimension, but that doesn't make it one, any more than thinking of round squares or black whites makes them really exist."

"Absolutely!" agreed Web cheerfully.

"Well, for Heaven's sake, stop being an idiot and tell me what it's all about!" She was beginning to be exasperated. Web saw the fiery temper rising and promptly took heed.

"It's really quite simple," he commenced. "What I've done is to build a time-space traveler, working by atomic energy. Even as long ago as 1913, you know, Rutherford succeeded in partly breaking down the hydrogen atom. By 1930, others succeeded in partially breaking down atoms with high voltages of electricity. But they used up far more energy than they got back, or released. I've simply perfected the method to a point where, with an initial bombardment of fifty volts, I can break down one atom and get back thousands of times the energy I put in. There's nothing strange or wonderful or miraculous about it. I don't create energy or power from nothing. I simply liberate energy that already exists. Part of that power I use to break down another atom, and so on, while the rest is diverted to propel the torpedo by discharging through tubes—like a rocket. I've made one short experimental trip. She worked to perfection.

"But I built this boat for a bigger purpose than just traveling from here to the Moon or Mars or Venus, Eileen. I built it for the biggest purpose possible—to conquer time and space together. I'm going out, far out in space, beyond the solar system, into the void and on through the galactic universe. I'm going

farther than that, Ellen, where few men have dared even to think of going." A light burned in his eyes, the light of the adventurer, the daredevil, the dreamer who has faith because he bases his dreams on facts.

"I'm going out to the abysses beyond our known universe, to the great nebulæ that lie at the limit of our most powerful telescopes, and the black voids, and the deeps that continue forever and ever—out to the eternal and infinite cosmos whose nature we don't know. Light never traveled as fast as I'll travel—a million miles a second and more, a billion miles, maybe. Think of it, Ellen, a billion miles in a second! Past the Moon and Venus and Mars and Jupiter and Saturn in one short second! Astronomical distances? They'll mean nothing to me! Barring accidents, I can accelerate my speed to rates I hardly even dare guess at, but I've figured them out, and they're frightening."

His eyes were aflame, and they held the girl motionless.

"And the faster I travel, Ellen," he continued, "the more a change will come. My torpedo and everything in it will lengthen out in the direction of flight. I won't know it. I won't have any basis for comparison. I'll feel and see and be normal, from my standpoint, but the change will be there. And the laws of Earth won't hold good. A second to me will be an hour on Earth, and much, much more, even. To me, my minute will be a normal minute. To Earth, its minute will be the same old minute. But they won't be identical—I'll be burning up space and time! And when I come back, Ellen"—the ghost of a smile hovered around his mouth—"it will be in the future, centuries hence. Earth will have changed. Friends, acquaintances, every one I know will be dead and forgotten. When I start, there'll be no coming back to the time I left. God knows what I'll find when I return. Utopia, I hope. Mankind at its peak, civilization in the golden age of its maturity, all the old troubles and wars and hates and infirmities done away with——

"That's what I meant when I said a while ago it would be too late. I want you to come with me, Ellen—a partner for life, a partner on the greatest adventure of all! I'm going in a week or ten days. I've waited two years for your answer, Ellen. Now there isn't time to wait any more."

For a long interval the girl made no reply. What could one say to so staggering a proposal? She felt dazed by the tremendous vista that Web had opened, her head awhirl with racing miles and running years and a dream that took the whole universe and all eternity for its province. Shaken, confused by a tumult of thoughts, she wavered. Should she yield to this quixotic young madman whom nothing could daunt?

But the good Earth was sweet—the Sun and the flowers, the smiles on the faces of friends, the familiar comforts of everyday life. Return an exile, in a strange world, under circumstances that no one could predict? No! Far better a normal life, even if it might be occasionally dull! Far better to wait, to do cautious experimenting before plunging into so wild an adventure.

Her mind was made up. "I won't do it, Web—not yet, anyway," she began. "Later, perhaps."

"Later! Always later!" he cried in bitter reproof. "I won't wait longer!"

"I'm not keeping you back. Besides, Mr. Daniels has——"

"Has what? Won out?"

"No, not that."

"What then?"

"Nothing," she replied evasively, as though she regretted having said too much, and no further explanation would she give. As they drove to her quarters, Web exhausted his arguments in an effort to shake her decision. And she, in turn, worked herself into a turmoil attempting in vain to dissuade him from rash procedure, trying to get him to wait another month, at least, and think it all over again.

The net result was that they bade each other a chill good night and stormed on their separate ways.

II

WEB WENT ahead with his preparations and began stocking his cosmo-craft with everything he would need, and a few extras that might be of value. Neither the day following his heated debate with Ellen, nor yet on the succeeding day, did he attempt to communicate with her. But on the third day, he had cooled off to such an extent that he decided he would make another last effort to win her over. He strode to the telephone and called Dameis's laboratory. No answer. He tried the house phone. Still no answer. This was very odd. Since two servants were in the house, besides Dameis and Ellen, it was unusual that no one would hear the phone. Web waited a few minutes, thinking he might have been given a wrong number, and tried again. Finally he rang off in annoyance.

With the usual perversity of frustration, he now wanted more than ever what he could not have, and what he had only yesterday been firmly determined to avoid. He was, to be brief, in a state of exasperation where he could have chewed tacks, when the afternoon mail came.

Among the pieces was a fat letter from Ellen. He pounced upon it and ripped it open. Inside were a half dozen sheets of paper, scribbled on with evident haste.

"I have only a half hour at most, Web," the letter began abruptly, "and then the door will give way and I'll have to do what Warren requests. I could kill myself, but that's the coward's way out, and I'm going to fight to the end. I know now that it is you I love. Always, Web, always. And if there is anything at all that you can do to help me, do it, *do it!* You are the only one who can help.

"I never told you, because I was sworn to secrecy, but I've got to tell you now. Warren has been obsessed for a year or more by the notion of time conquest. Like yourself, he has been trying to find a way to travel into the future. And he, too, has succeeded, in a different manner.

"You know that he was working with anaesthetics and depressants. I've helped him, because he's been discovering a lot of things of value in medical psychology. Well, about a year ago, he got the idea, after watching a bear hibernate during the winter, that there was no reason why a human being couldn't, too. From that stage he passed to the idea of controlled hibernation for indefinite periods, and from that to the hope of discovering what he called 'consciousness retarded animation.'

"There are drugs, you know, that depress the heart and relieve pain, drugs that affect the whole cardiac and neural systems and make them much slower to react than normal, like morphine, the other opium derivatives, and the category of narcotics. Well, Warren began working with anodynes, opiates, and depressants of all kinds. He even dis-

covered a couple of new ones, especially one that he calls 'anadrenalin,' because it has just the opposite effect of adrenalin. Instead of stimulating the heart violently, it retards the heart and the whole neural system to infinitesimal activity.

"But that wasn't enough. He got hold of an Egyptian mummy, and set about analyzing every gum and drug that the ancients had used to preserve it. And naturally he found their secret of preserving the body from decay. So then he had two valuable discoveries: the art of retarded existence, and the certainty of physical preservation, for prolonged periods.

"An hour ago he came to me with a proposal, Web. I turned him down. Then he told me what he was going to do. He's had a fused quartz and steel dome built on the solid rock at the peak of the hill behind this place. He says he's going in there to take his anadrenalin, and an injection of the preserving fluid which he calls 'corporol.'

"Oh, Web, do you see what this means? It means that the rate, the tempo of his existence will be slowed down almost to zero. But from his own standpoint, he'll be living a normal life. People outside will see him as a dead man, never moving, while he, inside, will see the whole world apparently speed up, and the Sun rush across the sky, and the seasons fly past in minutes. He'll be traveling in time, Web, in a real sense—but there'll be no coming back—never, never, never!

"He wants me to go with him, Web. He says we'll travel into the far future, where men are wise enough to appreciate him. I told him I wasn't interested. At heart, he isn't as black as people make him, but these discoveries of his have swept him away.

"You'll come, whether you want to or not!' he threatened.

"'I'll call for help!' I answered.

"'A lot of good that will do you,' he told me. 'I dismissed the servants this morning. Yell your head off. There's no one to hear you. I've only made enough anadrenalin and corporol for two. I've destroyed my records. You're coming with me, and no one can follow.'

"At that, I turned and fled. He ran fast, but fear gave me speed, and I beat him to my room and locked the door. He's breaking it in now, and it's only minutes before it gives way. A whiff of ether, a jab of a hypodermic needle, and I'm done for. I'll be taken into the future with him.

"The window has always had a grille, so I can't escape that way, but my room overlooks the path, and I'm going to tie this letter with thread to something heavy and throw it out so that the postman can't help seeing it in the morning. It will be too late to help me directly, Web—but you said your time-space traveler works. If it does, follow me into the future!

"Web, I can't come to you—you've got to come to me. If you don't, I'll be cut off from my world, lost in the future, and there'll be no coming back, ever! But I'll be waiting, always, for you to come. Ellen."

The appeal in the last paragraph galvanized Web out of the daze and inertia that had spellbound him while he read.

He reached Daniels's laboratory in the fastest time he had ever made. He was hardly aware of the flying miles, or how he got there, for a leaden refrain told him over and over again that he was too late—too late—for the letter had been written early last night, and now it was mid-afternoon.

He made only a pretense of ringing the bell before breaking in a window, the door being locked. A complete silence prevailed in the old mansion. The high ceilings and the oak wainscoting echoed back his cry, and yet preserved an aloof dignity. He raced to the laboratory. It was empty.

He cleared the steps four at a time to Ellen's rooms. The smashed door sagged on one hinge, and the wreckage in the room mutely told of the last struggle. With despair breeding a dull bitterness in him, he emerged from the mansion and hastened up the path to the hilltop a few hundred yards away.

He had seen the crystal dome only once before, from a distance. Now he examined it closely as he approached. It glinted opaquely in the sunlight. Thirty feet in diameter, it rested like a great puff-ball, a crown on the solid rock of the hill. As he ran toward it, he noticed the ribs of fine steel, the smooth and perfect curve of the hemisphere. He flattened his face against its iron-hard surface and peered in.

As through a fog, he saw the two figures, one reclining on a couch. Ellen, sleeping—or was she sleeping? He could not tell. And the other about to sit down—— Yet, so long as he watched, that figure did not change its curious posture or move an inch farther toward the chair. Frozen bodies would not have seemed more rigid or sculptured marble more permanent and unchanging than these two forms. Through the opaque quartz they were dreamlike, unreal, fantastic creatures of the imagination that exerted the spell of hypnosis.

It required an effort for Web to shake himself free of his paralysis, and circle the dome. No entrance could he find, unless there was one behind a large, inset plaque. Pausing to read its inscription, he knew that he had come to a door of no opening. Letters were engraved on that plaque, letters that leaped out like flame to his eyes.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

ONLY TIME
CAN EFFECT AN ENTRANCE
TO THIS EVERLASTING TOMB
LET THE DEAD REST IN PEACE

Warren had foreseen everything and acted accordingly. No more fitting words could have been chosen to cause strangers to pass reverently on.

III

RECOLLECTION CAME slowly to Ellen. The stupefying effects of the hypodermic were off slowly. But she began to recall the wild light in the eyes of Warren Daniels—his assault upon the door to her room—its crash inward—her furious struggle before the needle jabbed in—then blankness and darkness.

Her eyes stared through a fog, a fog that gradually lifted until she realized that it was only an illusion, resulting from drugged vision. The mist cleared away.

She lay on a couch in a great, domed room. Across from her was another couch. In the center of the rock floor stood a small machine of dials and clockwork mechanism. A man was bending over it—Warren.

One of the characteristics that Web loved in Ellen was her nerve, her courage in facing realities. She did not become hysterical or lose her head, even now. She sat up with quick self-control.

"Well?" She spoke in a tuneless voice. "What's the answer?"

Warren wheeled around. "Oh, hello! Glad you're awake at last.

Sorry, my dear, for the inconvenience. But everything's all right, so far."

Ellen stood up and walked toward Warren. She halted a few feet from him, her gray eyes looking straight into his.

"Please forget the personal terms. I was forced into this, and you know it. You have forfeited every hope of friendship or anything else from me. Remember that. Whatever the result, nothing that you can do will ever make me like you."

The man's face grew hard. "You forget that I am master here." His hand withdrew from his pocket, holding an automatic.

A merthless smile appeared on Ellen's face. "You may be a brilliant experimenter, but you are a fool, Warren. You wouldn't have kidnaped me unless you wanted me very badly. Therefore, you won't shoot. You'll do everything you can to blustter and persuade, and use force, and it won't get you anywhere. I accept the situation, because I must. But I would rather kill myself than accept you. That is final. You can either kill me, which you won't, or risk having me escape at the first opportunity. You thought you'd win. You haven't. You've lost."

"Now, Ellen——" he began, in an effort to soothe her. She did not wait to hear him out. She turned squarely and walked to the wall, peering through the translucent quartz. Blurred, the outside world showed itself to her scrutiny. Her heart gave a queer leap at what she saw.

Trees wavered and swelled and vanished. A vast flame cut across the zenith, arcing from horizon to horizon, widened in the middle like an ellipse. It was the Sun she saw—a Sun racing through days and running so swiftly from southern to northern solstice that its course became a single arch spanning the heavens. A peculiar grayness, such as she had never seen, hung over the world—the result of days blending with nights in such swift succession that the eye perceived them as one.

For long minutes—were they minutes or speeding years?—she stood there, watching the dull flame in the sky, the unchanging grayness, the vegetation that forever changed in cycles of spring and summer and autumn and chill winter, bursting to fullness and withering away and growing again and dying at last, to give way before newer trees that lived only a brief minute before her eyes.

She felt dizzy, appalled, as she turned away at last.

Warren was watching her with intent gaze. "Don't be frightened," he reassured her. "The world's all right. It's we who are different. The anadrenalin has retarded our nervous systems and consequently our perceptions to a virtual standstill. The world goes on as it always has. To ourselves, we appear to be living normally, but we aren't. The result is an apparent speeding up of all except ourselves. Vegetation, Sun, human life, planetary orbits—everything seems to have heightened its tempo."

"I—I understand," said Ellen weakly, and sat down to reflect on this fantastic existence that she was living.

The days became a dream. She felt as though she were constantly drugged, always about to fall imagelessly asleep or to awaken into substantial reality. But she saw only the hands that spun upon the dials, mounting through hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of years, creeping slowly among the

hundreds of thousands. And ever the trees flourished and melted away, the Sun swept through its annual cycle, and the grayness outside perceptibly deepened.

By that change alone she knew that the Sun's energy was weakening. And the wide band gradually contracted—proof that the tidal drag was succeeding in its invisible influence as years mounted into centuries more numerous than autumn leaves upon the ground.

What was happening in the domain of man? Was he progressing toward the prophesied golden age, with warfare over, and the hope of eternal peace and eternal progress at last becoming true? Or was he fighting as always, destroying his future in the fierce hatreds of the present? She wondered. Perhaps men slew each other behind the veil which she could not pierce. Yet it might be that they grew wiser with the wisdom of ages, and worked nearer toward a solution of the old riddles: the nature of life, and the mystery of death.

Had Web received her note? Could he possibly act upon it? Was his invention a myth or a fact? Or had he died eons ago, with all the rest of the period which had been hers? She had no way of knowing. A sadness settled upon her when she thought of friends, family, acquaintances, all the intimate pleasures of the world she had known dead in irrecoverable years. Never to return—never again to know life as she had experienced it—that was the tragedy; and to be set down in an alien epoch, barred by vistas of time from even the slightest comprehension—that was the unlovely future.

Was it? She began to feel a new zest in the adventure. After all, what was done, was done. Dead years and oblivious lives could never be reclaimed. Idle to regret them, useless to weep vain tears. And so, a mounting curiosity in her mind, she turned her attention more and more to that approaching future and the promised day of release.

Warren? Many were the efforts he made to cajole, to flatter, to win, to break her defenses. She was a stone wall. To each advance, she was frigid. Binding her was out of the question—it meant certain, instant death under the curious laws of his experiment. And winning her assent was a task wherein Warren could not see that he made the slightest progress.

He persevered, ingratiating, attentive. There was nothing else to do. But her vision was centered upon the figure of a striding youth, a tall, fair-haired man who regarded his self-esteem as more important than anything else, and who had dreamed of the conquest of time through the conquest of space, and the winning of Ellen through his own values.

And ever the grayness darkened, the swath of flame narrowed in the skies. The trees grew and vanished like puffs of dust stirred by the wind upon a summer's day.

It was a slow and growing, grinding pain in her body that first made Ellen aware of a change. The grayness without began to flicker, the flame-arc in the heavens commenced a smoky oscillation, the blobs of vegetation diminished their furious cycle. She saw through tortured eyes that the dials whirled with a less appalling speed. She saw the pallor that crept upon Warren's face, and heard his teeth grate harshly.

Waves of fire surged through her, every nerve in her being twitched with agony. Dizziness caught her. The flitting succession of day and night became more discernible. The

Sun swung back to a steady orbit. By degrees the pain departed. And Ellen, emerging as from a terrible nightmare, found the world stable as ever of old.

"I wonder what it will be like, outside," Warren speculated as he stretched his cramped limbs.

IV

IN A BLIND frenzy, Web beat on the walls till his knuckles cracked, a symbol of his frustrated desire. He was tempted to smash the barrier at any cost, yet he knew that he would not, could not risk jeopardizing Ellen. For long minutes he fumbled to find the outside button, but when he found it and pressed it, nothing happened, proof that now the dome could be opened only from within.

When his madness subsided, he took a final sad, hungry look at the tableau—the unchanged figure on the couch, the motionless man about to seat himself. He saw the few furnishings of the interior, what might have been an oxygenizing tube that pierced the rock floor, and something he had not previously noticed—a clockwork machine with dials. He could hardly decipher the hands or the figures, but after intense scrutiny decided that there was a series for hours, days, months, hundreds, thousands, and millions. The black hour hand was moving. A set of red indicators was fixed at 1,991,000. Did it mean that Warren had planned his return at the year one million, and was timing himself by the clockwork to see how close his estimate came to the actual result?

Web could only guess. It was the sole clue he had. The rest lay in the arms of the future.

He strode downhill without a backward glance at the dome that glowed brightly in the rays of the setting Sun.

He drove to his own laboratory in a kind of daze. Dully he wheeled the *Ellen* outside. The craft lay silvery in the shadows of evening. Still with mechanical motions, Web looked around at the world he was leaving—the trees standing full-leaved and dark, flowers that drooped in the stirless air, the faint glow made by the lights of the city. There was no Moon. The skies were a great blaze of stars. He turned his weary eyes toward them, and in their tremendous majesty seemed to find a certain kinship, a certain relief. Up there, out there, the infinite spaces were beckoning.

He climbed in. The outer and inner doors clicked behind him. He sat down at the controls and released the mutual electrical bombardment. The craft rose swiftly, so swiftly that the external shell grew hot. In twenty minutes, Web had passed all the atmospheric blankets of Earth. He laid his course for Betelgeuse, set the instruments for automatic control, and prepared for hours of weary calculations. Danger of collision with asteroids? There was none at his present moderate velocity. A seismo-cosmo-tel, sensitive to the presence of any body with a larger diameter than a hundred feet within a radius of a million miles, would swing the cruiser out of danger. And at the terrific speed he would achieve later, the presence of smaller bodies would not matter. Avoidance of anything within a billion miles of him would be impossible. A smash would mean instant annihilation. It was a constant risk that he had to accept.

Wasting no more thought on the subject, he plunged into the labyrinth of stellar dynamics, quantum

mathematics, astro-physics, and the space-time continuum. His problem was to complete a stupendous sequence of equations. Given the necessity of returning to Earth exactly at the year one million. Given the diameter of the known universe. Given the potential speed of the *Ellen* with its atomic power fully unloosed. Given the percentage of distortion in moving bodies, in the direction of their flight, proportionate to their increasing velocity beyond that of light. Given the time-shortening which would affect consciousness in inverse ratio to the speed of the *Ellen* when it exceeded that of light. To find a paraboloid course which, taking all factors into consideration, would return Web to Earth at the end of a million years.

Web had set his course toward Betelgeuse when he began calculations. At his reduced speed, seventeen days had passed, and he had not yet left the solar system before the brain-shattering calculus was completed. Had he made an error? Only the Future could say. How close were his computations to exactness? Only the gods knew. And so, on the eighteenth day, alone in his Odyssey of space, he began making a reality out of his figures.

He stepped up the atomic power, minute by minute, each acceleration bringing a wilder leap to the *Ellen*. She bored through the great waste around the solar system. She streaked outward and passed the plane of Alpha Centauri before that eighteenth day was ended—four full light-years! Her velocity continued rising, from a thousand to a million, and now nearly a billion miles per second. And Web knew that as he flashed through the Milky Way, a change was occurring. He could not sense it, for he was part of that change. But the *Ellen*, and everything in it, including he himself, were lengthening in the direction of flight. And as they distorted, the laws of Earth ceased to operate, the laws of cosmic super-dynamics became regnant. With the terrible velocity at which the *Ellen* was now streaming across the universe had come a change in Web's relation to that universe. He was not overtly aware of it, but he knew it existed. As speed mounted, his time-awareness shortened. In other words, as his craft and his body were transformed physically, his mind suffered a delusion. Though a second seemed a second still, it actually represented an hour, a year, and finally centuries of Earth time.

Web felt like that little insect, the ephemeris, which lives its entire life in a day. To that insect, its life is a complete cycle from birth to death, though it exists only a day. Its perception of time is shortened, from the standpoint of man, who lives his average of seventy years. Similarly, man, from Web's standpoint, was an ephemeris, racing through a feverish life of a day, while he, Web, existed for years. The time-sense of the ephemeris was shortened with regard to man. The time-sense of man was shortened with regard to Web. And he——

There were days when he went mad in the loneliness of his ship, days when he sat for hours in a stupor, days when he stared dully into the seleno-cosmo-tel and munched tastelessly on concentrated, imperishable nutriments. Betelgeuse had flamed nearer and vanished behind him in a few seconds. He saw the ever-changing procession of stars, rising radiant far ahead, wheeling visibly, sweeping rearward with the dazzling streak of lightning. He watched the familiar constellations

dle—the big dipper, Antares, the entire Milky Way shot behind him.

And ever his velocity mounted, and the vast dark beyond the stellar universe came, and hurtled past; and far out, where space and time became as dreamlike as an evanescent bubble upon Earth, the *Ellen* rocketed toward the spiral nebulæ and the astronomical riddles beyond that no telescope on Earth had ever brought into view.

His was an Odyssey that took all time and all space for its province, with the stars for witness and the nebulæ as monitors, and Nemesis always at hand in the shape of a wandering comet or a lone asteroid; a labyrinthine plunge through abysms and chasms of night, of stars, of unplumbed wastes and unknown dangers beyond.

The light of the Sun had never penetrated as far as the *Ellen* pierced, a silvery bolt through the cosmos, beyond the solar system, beyond the Milky Way, beyond the spiral nebulæ and the gas nebulæ, beyond the known universe and the island universes, always beyond and away, where the world of man became a lost dream, and where eternity vied with infinity, and where the mind trembled in the presence of realities above its deepest imagining.

And Web, in the frantic loneliness of his cruiser, lived a nightmare of space, a fantasy of time. At his frightful speed—now thousands of light-years per Earth-second—the extension of the *Ellen* must have reached hundreds of thousands of miles, an attenuation verging on vaporization. His time-perception must have slowed to almost nothing; yet there seemed no change, for there was no measuring stick by which he could differentiate the normal from the abnormal. And when he passed the limits of the expanding universe, passed into the super-cosmos of total blackness and limitless void, there were not even the stars or the light of stars for witness.

But his calculations held good, to the extent that the automatic controls veered the course of the *Ellen* so that she swung in a stupendous oval until her course was reversed. It was a feverish and desolate existence that Web endured, peering into the seleno-cosmo-tel, where only blackness showed, trying to estimate time when there was no means for estimating it, except his theoretical equations; trusting in the accuracy of controls, and the durability of metals under terrific stresses.

Back there on Earth, two people were racing through time. Out here, he was annihilating space and time together in the strangest of all duels—a struggle whose opponents were separated by infinity. No wonder that he lived in a daze and slept in a delirium; no marvel that his head bowed upon his knees as he endeavored to comprehend the weirdness and terror and mystery that had baffled the mind since man first began to reason.

Somewhere, the universe, a mere mote of light, twinkled again on the instruments. Somehow, the *Ellen*, a cyclonic fury of rampant power, shot into the outer limits of the physical universe once more. And the outposts of light passed in a surge of glory, and the utmost nebulæ streaked rearward, and the old, familiar constellations burned anew. Familiar? Not quite—for there were great and noticeable changes in their positions as he remembered them.

The rest of his voyage was an alternation of hope and fear—hope of success, fear of failure, combined

with continual doubt of the accuracy of his calculations. He slowed the *Ellen* according to his equations in jerks that lopped hundreds of light-years per second from her previous constant; systematically he decelerated as the Milky Way approached.

She was down to a few dozen light-years per second when he passed the plane of Alpha Centauri. She was below the velocity of light when he crossed the orbit of Pluto. She was back to fifty thousand miles when the Sun, a curiously dark, red, waning ball, loomed large. Her long, far wanderings were only a vague blur in memory when she settled to the good ground of Earth.

Web climbed out, wearily, like one whom a vast burden has overtaken. He hardly noticed the Sun that westered, bloodily red, or the low, fantastic vegetation, or the air that was thin and biting cold. His eyes were centered on the crystal dome, weather-worn and crumbling. With a shiver of discomfort that included apprehension, he raced toward the dome.

Its panel hung open. There was no one within.

V.

"LET'S GET out of here," said Warren.

Ellen nodded passively. He opened the panel, and they walked out. Intent upon his exit, Warren did not notice the piece of shale which Ellen left by the instruments.

Together they stood in a new world, a far world, the world of the year 1,000,000.

And Ellen's heart sank. The Sun hung straight overhead, an enormous ball of bloody red, glowing like a dying ember. It covered fully a twelfth of the entire sky. Yet it cast only a shadowy and sinister light, and a bitter chill tinged the air.

Air? Her lungs gasped to draw in that thin, biting atmosphere. A silence more oppressive than thunder greeted her. She saw no living thing. No bird's cry floated toward her, no insect sang its song of joy, only a faint wind whispered with a dry rustle. And far away, where the old city had risen, where its gigantic buildings had once aspired to reach the clouds, she saw nothing. Was this the promised future? This desolation of red silence?

"I'm cold," she said, her face already blue around the lips. A little tremor shook her.

"Come on," answered Warren. "We've got to get food and shelter, and find somebody. This damn silence is getting my nerves."

They plunged downhill.

The vegetation was the strangest Ellen had ever seen. She recognized none of it—dwarf stalks with bushy crowns, fungi six feet high and more, yet stiff as rind, and frondage that carpeted the ground with spiky velvet. They were of decadent colors: heavy green and the purple of egg-plant, mauve, red like a stain of old blood, and the browns that she had long ago seen in dead leaves. It was a world of somber oppression, a world of brooding antiquity and decay in which she walked.

They strode together for hours, and the Sun barely moved above them. A fear of that staring, enormous orb came upon her, a terror of the silence and the desolate landscape and the fantastic vegetation. She moved closer to Warren.

"The work of the tidal drag and the attraction of gravity," he mused. "The Sun is almost at a standstill. Something must have interfered to hasten the inevitable—perhaps a

wandering comet came in. Wonder where the people are."

They emerged, finally, upon the site where New York had risen in its vastness, and halted in dismay. A smooth plain rolled before them; a plain on which no building or habitation of any sort remained. From their eminence on the old Jersey shore, they could see no river where the Hudson had run, no buildings where the city had loomed, no sign of the Atlantic, whose waters should have spread only a few miles away.

"We'll have to rest a few minutes," said Warren. "I'll find out if these fungi are edible."

He gathered spikes and branches of dead growths, and succeeded in starting a fire with the magnifying glass he always carried. The purple and green and scarlet and liver-colored mushrooms he passed without a second glance. A four-foot-high cone that looked like a sponge attracted him. He examined it closely. It had no stem-cup, no ring. He broke it off and found it hollow inside. "Probably a giant species of the *morchella deliciosa*," he decided, and carried it to the fire.

"We'll have to chance it," he told Ellen. "This looks like the tastiest of the old mushrooms, though it's larger than the species ever grew before."

He cooked a slice and nibbled it experimentally. It tasted a good deal like musty chicken. They made a meal off the huge fungus, then resumed their course in search of water, which they finally encountered in a tiny stream.

Fully ten miles east of where New York had once risen, they came upon the first evidence of civilization—a ruined structure whose nature could not be guessed. In the distance, they saw a vague blur, toward which they went.

When they reached the blur, the depression that gripped them became despair. It was, indeed, the later metropolis of New York. They surmised that it was, because the Atlantic, incredibly low and marshy, extended beyond. But the cyclopean edifices had crumbled away. Mountains of debris, rubbish, and wreckage blocked the streets. The city seemed like a second Pompeii, buried almost to its roof-tops with the detritus of unknown centuries. They saw no human being, heard no sound of bird, animal, or man. They had merely left the bleakness of a wilderness for the desert of an abandoned city.

Climbing through a choked street for a preliminary exploration, they entered the broken windows of one titanic edifice. Thick dust swirled up. In the rotted cabinet of what was once an apartment, they found candles, crumbling with age yet still good, and with the aid of the unsunken Sun succeeded in lighting a pair.

"But why do you want to go down into that musty gloom?" asked Ellen.

And Warren replied: "Partly for curiosity, partly to see if there are canned goods below. Maybe we'll find something we can use."

Down staircases that disintegrated with natural decay, and were piled with the silt of aeons, they wandered, their candles throwing grotesque shadows along the walls and landings. A hundred flights they descended, passing empty business quarters, deserted cabarets, apartment levels, and stores of many kinds, before they reached bottom. There they found food shops—but only brownish dust remained of the stocks, and a few fragments of rust that might once have been tinned foods. The air was foul.

"It's awful, like a nightmare. Let's go back!" cried Ellen.

Warren made no reply. Even as she, he was overwhelmed by the evidence of antiquity. Further search was useless. Wearily, they began the long climb out.

"What can have happened? Where are the people? Why is everything so silent and dead?" asked the girl, a helpless note in her voice.

"I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine, though I've been thinking it over," answered Warren. "The absence of any organic life, the obvious age of everything we've seen, the nearness of the Sun, and the peculiar vegetation—fungi of all sorts, you know—well, they indicate some sort of catastrophe. It'll take a lot of investigation to decide what did happen. But I'm afraid for the worst, Ellen—afraid now that we may not find any other living human beings."

She had expected that announcement, but its bald audible form struck her like a blow. A pallor came into her face. "You mean that we are alone? That there are no other people left?"

"Yes." Bitter disappointment for him, too, was expressed in that one word. "We seem to be——"

A shrill, hysterical cry from the girl stopped him. It was the only time she lost her self-control. "You did it, Warren! You've robbed me! Robbed me of my life! Brought me to this dead world! And so long as I live, I'll never forgive you, or forget, or do anything but hinder you in every way I can!"

The candle threw weird shadows upon her face, its lovely features twisted in the torture of her thoughts.

"Please, Ellen," began Warren softly. But she had regained her composure as suddenly as she lost it.

"I'm all right. Forget it," she whispered huskily, and dried her eyes.

Warren broke the awkward silence. "I can only think of one explanation. If a large comet came close enough, passing between the Earth and the Sun, it might have produced a result like this. Swinging by the Sun, it would attract the Sun closer to Earth, and possibly cause radical changes in the Sun itself. Passing the Earth very near, it might draw off the greater part of the atmospheric blanket. The result would be death to organic life and most inorganic life. The fungi, minute-spored, short-lived, and quickly growing, would stand the best chance of survival.

"As they grew, with a near-by Sun to supply heat, and a longer day, they would gradually create a larger supply of air, thin as it is. They would become woody in texture, because of the decreased moisture. And in the ordinary processes of evolution, they could easily reach the sizes we have seen.

"Of course, it's possible that some other catastrophe may have happened. And while we've met no human beings yet, it doesn't prove that there may not be some elsewhere, inland, or on other continents. But if there aren't any, it's up to us, Ellen, to—to preserve the race. You see that, don't you?"

"Preserve the race?" she echoed blankly. Warren? This man who had cheated her, tricked her, torn her from her rightful life? Put a hopeless barrier between her and the man she could have accepted? A faraway look came into her eyes. She saw the striding figure of a youth who played the game squarely. Would Web come? If he did, would he see the slate tablet she had left? If he found it, would he be able to

trail them? Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless! To dream that success would attend Web's efforts! She did not even know whether he had received the letter she flung from her window that night a million years ago. But Warren—never. From her reverie she was startled by Warren's grabbing her arm and excitedly thrusting something at her.

"Ellen! Look!"

"What is it?" she began. She saw, by the feeble light of the candles, that it was an ancient newspaper, printed on rag pulp which had survived the ravage of centuries. Moldy, disintegrating, green-splotched, it was still legible. The headlines leaped out:

WORLD DOOMED!

Gobel's Dark Star Will Suck Air From Earth, Scientists Predict

It was as Warren had surmised. The feverish account told of the approach of a giant invader from outer space which, within twelve hours, would pass close to Earth, drawing off its atmosphere, possibly great portions of the seas, perhaps even causing disruption or explosion of the Earth. But mankind was doomed! The paper bore the date, September 1, 995,851.

"And to think that we lived through it all, without knowing!" whispered Warren. "But what little oxygen remained was enough for us in our retarded existence. Ellen, we are the sole surviving members of the human race!"

VI

WEB, WITH a thumpy irregularity in his heart, now that his desperate gamble had brought him to his goal, entered the crystal dome. Somehow, he must have miscalculated, for Ellen and Warren were gone. How long was it since they had left?

Dust lay heavy on the floor. Yet it was not thick enough to conceal the scratched letters on a piece of slate unobtrusively lying near the instruments. He seized it with hands that trembled.

"Web," it began abruptly, "we're reaching the end. Look outside in a radius of 100 years for another slate. I'll try to leave signs pointing our direction. Dial reads 999,700. Love. Ellen."

Even as he was about to plunge abruptly outside, his ears caught a faint whir, loud as Niagara in this absolute silence. What could it be? The dials continued working, still ticking away the hours of inexorable time?

He examined the machine with brief interest.

The hands stood at 1,001,950.

He emerged from a period of black despair to find that he had exhausted himself beating the machine blindly, cursing it, hurling frenzied imprecations to the great wilderness, blaspheming his own stupidity as full realization of his error swept upon him.

Warren had set his time-destination at 1,000,000 A. D., counting from the year 1. Web had set his destination at the year 1,000,000, counting from the day he left in 1950. All his calculations were correct—but the original misunderstanding had made him arrive 1950 years too late. And there was no way of going back to the girl who must have died centuries before, after vainly waiting for him who failed her and who did not come.

Like a madman, he lunged outside. He ran for hours before his frenzy of self-recrimination and bitterness

passed. The same old silence was still around him, the same old Sun, huge and crimson and close, sat low on the western horizon; the same grotesque fungi reared their fantastic shapes on every side; and the thin air grew yet more biting cold.

A faint wind whispered through mushrooms that visibly withered and died, their long day done. A flake of snow swirled coldly against his face. The Sun edged its way around a dying world.

Alone and lonely, Web strode eastward, calm with the courage of despair—the last man of a once-teeming globe.

He squared his shoulders. The gods had cheated him—but he walked proud and unafraid toward the darkening land and the slate-gray skies eastward.

Coincidence?

WHAT writer would dare use the following incident in a work of fiction? And yet this coincidence is true and authentic.

A woman sitting in a moving-picture house in the French town of Lille suddenly started and uttered a cry. She was watching a travel film representing life in the city of Buenos Aires, and her eyes, fixed on the screen without any great interest, had without warning settled on the face of a girl looking out of a window into the street. And the face of this sad-looking girl was, she had the strongest impression, that of her daughter, Marie, who had disappeared from Lille during the summer.

So convinced that she had actually seen her daughter was the woman, Madame Vauron, that she sat through the reel once more. She left the theater staggered by the conviction.

She went to the police. They were at first inclined to think the woman was mistaken, but when she had induced some friends who knew Marie to go and see the film, and they too believed the girl was the missing typist, the police took notice.

They attended to the case in a thorough fashion. They had enlargements made from the film and sent them over to the authorities in Buenos Aires, who at once recognized the street and house. And furthermore, in the house they found Marie Vauron.

Her story was one that is often told. In Lille she met a sleek and plausible rascal, Lucien Rodet, who held out glowing promises of the money to be made in South America. He told her he could get her a highly paid job as secretary to a millionaire, only it so happened that he had to leave for Buenos Aires at once, and if she wanted to get the job she must accompany him there and then. She could write to her mother and tell her.

But the job to which Rodet conducted her was one which the South American city and most other cities all over the world is known to award to trusting maidens.

Trapped by circumstances, Marie could not get free. She was a prisoner in this house. One day, hearing jabbering in the street, she looked out, and as it happened was included in a picture being taken by a French film company.

Her release was secured and she was restored to her mother by what seemed to both a miraculous agency.

Burroughs Passes

by Kenneth James

MOST OF HIS thinking life, Burroughs had been afraid to die.

Yet, some curious streak of obstinacy, a kind of goaded courage, had determined him to fight his fear; and so he found himself a soldier. Too young to have been in the war, and as yet unfleshed by battle, he stood now tensely on guard against unworthy emotions which fought to show themselves, while Edwardes, commanding the fort, referred to a telegram in his hand and in matter-of-fact tones discussed his plans.

"Two hundred Chinese brigands, according to this telegram," Edwardes was saying

"I don't think, myself, that they are ordinary brigands—too many of 'em. They're probably deserters from one of the many Chinese armies. Tough stuff, I imagine. We'll have our hands full."

His broad face, bronzed and red-traced by the weather vagaries of many expeditions, puckered for a moment with thought. Then he continued:

"I'll take two troops of mounted infantry. I'll need another white officer."

He rose, and Burroughs, furtively wiping his hands, clammy with apprehensive sweat, against his trousers, steadied his voice to ask:

"When do we start?"

"To-night, of course. They've got a seventy-mile start, but they've been going some days, and we're fresh. We'll catch 'em, all right."

Burroughs winced at the certainty in the other man's voice.

Edwardes stood as if hesitant for a moment, then spoke again, apologetically.

"I'm afraid, old man, I shan't be able to take you this time. I want you to command the fort while I'm away. Curtis is a bit junior for the job. I'll take him with me, and let him have No. 1 troop to run. A pity we haven't more officers, but such is the frontier. You understand, of course?"

With relief came sudden reaction, and Burroughs clutched convulsively at the back of a chair to steady himself.

"But—but——" he stammered.

Edwardes nodded with misunderstanding sympathy.

"Bit of a blow, old lad?" he questioned. "Never mind. There'll be another chance soon. Things are waking up on this frontier, and about time, too. I'm terribly sorry."

He turned and walked down the bungalow steps and up the road toward his own house, muttering:

"Poor old chap. Wish I could take him. But we can't all go and leave the fort in the air."

From his window, Burroughs watched his senior stride energetically down the hill.

With red-hot shame he reviewed the joyful uplift with which he had greeted the news—so hesitantly given by Edwardes—that he would not accompany the column. Edwardes had been genuinely distressed at leaving him out, and was probably even now dubbing Burroughs a sportsman.

Burroughs groaned aloud. Edwardes was still well within earshot, barely eighty yards away. Burroughs, bounded by shame into action, leaned far out of the window. His was the right by seniority to accompany the column, and if he protested sufficiently, Edwardes might give way. His lips opened, forming the other man's name. But the shout never came. A hail from the opposite direction swung his head that way. It was Curtis, the third and most junior of the officers in the fort. He sat cupped in the linked arms of two sepoys, who bore him shambolingly down the steep path which led from the detachment football ground.

"Hullo, Burroughs!"

The hail had come from Curtis. He went on explanatorily:

"Just jiggered up my knee playing soccer. You'll have to take musketry for me to-morrow." It was evident that Curtis had not heard of the impending expedition. "I shan't be able to use it for days. Curse! Blast! Gently, you—you sons of buffaloes!"

He broke into angry profanity as a false step from one of the sepoys wrenched his damaged knee.

Burroughs called back condolences, but his mind was elsewhere. Fate had taken a hand in the game; he would go with the column now—not Curtis.

"I shall be killed. I shall be killed."

The haunting hysteria of his lifelong nightmare had started the sinister whisper somewhere in the deeps of his mind. He shook himself angrily, and turned away from the window.

"Go and be killed, then, damn you," he snarled angrily, grinning sheepishly a moment later at the realization that he had spoken aloud. Very deliberately, but with hands that shook in spite of the control he forced on himself, he filled and lit a pipe, and prepared to go across to Edwardes's bungalow. The start would be in a very few hours, and although the post lived with one foot in the stirrup, there were details to be arranged, rations and ammunition, the number of rounds per rifle. He shuddered, and to the crunching of the gravel under his feet there came the refrain:

"I shall be killed. I shall be killed."

Three hours later, in perfect starlight, the column, forty Gurkhas from the mounted infantry of the detachment, dropped slowly from the pine-clad summit of the fort site to the valley below. Starlight and silence, save for the jingling of bits, the creak of leather, and occasionally a stifled Gurkhali curse from one of the men as his pony stumbled on the steep declivity. Gradually, with the descent, the pines were left behind, and now the column moved among the somber brush and bamboo thickets of the valley.

And then very slowly occurred what to Burroughs had always seemed the never-failing miracle of the wilderness. The moon swam majestically over the shoulder of a hill, paling the stars and flooding the night with weird, heart-wrenching beauty.

"God, what a night to go to my death!"

Edwardes, his jaw set grimly, his mind on the work in hand, reacted more professionally to the phenomenon.

He moved slightly in his saddle and spoke curtly.

"This blasted light won't help matters. We must be fairly close to 'em—ought to make contact any moment now."

Edwardes's expectations remained unfulfilled.

The moon sank, leaving the night to the contrasting inanity of the stars, and still the column plodded on, the progress of the forty horses eerily silent over the sludgy carpet of dead and rotting leaves. The dawn wind was stirring the inert luxuriance of the undergrowth, and from infrequent points came the call of solitary birds, when the two officers, sagging in their saddles with the long ride, straightened at sight of figures in the path directly ahead of them. One of the scouts had returned, and was conferring with the column "point." He rode briskly up.

"Well?"

Edwardes had shaken off his stupor, and was again tensely a soldier. Stolidly, the scout gave his report. There were about two hundred *dusman* (enemy). They had just broken camp, and were pushing on fast. They seemed uneasy, and had put out a strong rear-guard. An hour's riding would suffice to catch up with them.

Edwardes's face lit up happily. In a few staccato sentences, he explained the situation to his men.

Scouts were recalled, the point halved and ordered to keep farther from the column, and with a creaking of saddles the column started off at a brisk trot.

"No time for finesse," Edwardes explained in undertones to Burroughs. "We're too near the frontier. It's just a chase to catch them before they get across."

Burroughs nodded. The refrain was haunting him again.

"I shall be killed. I know I'll be killed."

Try as he would to avoid it, his eyes turned hungrily to the somber thickets which bordered the path.

Crr-rack! Crr-rack! Phut-phut! As if in answer, the thickets were suddenly alive with hidden rifle fire.

With that first crashing volley paralysis severed Burroughs. Behind him the Gurkhas, with startled grunts or obscene curses, according to their degrees of wakefulness, scrambled from their ponies. Seven horse-holders slipped forward like automatons, and—incredibly, the path was deserted. The Gurkhas were under cover in the jungle, their eyes straining into the semidarkness of the undergrowth. In front, Edwardes strove vainly to leave his madly whirling pony, his flanks heavily scored by a Chinese bullet. He succeeded at last, and ran the shivering brute into the shelter of the brush. Burroughs, immobile as a statue, continued to set his pony in the middle of the path. Although his life depended on it, he was incapable in these moments of forcing his body to act. Apathetically, he awaited again the rending volley.

"Burroughs! What the hell do you think you're doing out there? Posing for a pretty picture? Get under cover! Quick!"

"There was nothing after the first volley."

Burroughs was surprised to find his voice level, tinctured even with mild contempt. Nevertheless, he moved slowly into the jungle toward Edwardes, to be greeted by him with hearty curses. Burroughs listened quietly; and then, as the other paused for breath, looked at him and smiled tranquilly, his face transfigured with the deep content that possessed him. The experience of those few minutes when he had waited for death had wrought a sea change, and in his heart he knew that the cloud of fear which had lowered over his life had lifted forever. Edwardes regarded him wonderingly.

"You seem to enjoy being potted at," he growled. He broke off as a Gurkha officer came up quietly to report.

"Nothing on the flanks," Edwardes repeated. "I thought so. That was just a running smack. There's open country a quarter of a mile ahead, and they'll probably make a stand there. No. 1 troop will attack. Burroughs, I'll support you with No. 2."

Burroughs saluted and joined his troop. He walked springily, body and mind alike vital with an energy he had never before felt, and gradually, irresistibly there rose in him an exultant ferocity. The fear of a lifetime had gone and the pendulum had swung. The blood lust was on Burroughs.

The extended line of No. 1 troop slipped unobtrusively out of the jungle into the plain. Three hundred yards ahead, a line of small bullocks humped themselves in similar fashion from the plain. Burroughs thrilled joyfully. The bullocks were grimly silent; not by the remotest flicker of a movement did they betray their deadliness—but Burroughs knew.

Two hundred yards—and hun-

dred, and then—blue-capped figures peered over and around the bushes which crowned the mounds. The air hummed with bullets, the ground coughed up dust, and here and there a stocky figure in the advancing line sank saggingly forward.

Burroughs's rising fury culminated now in berserk madness. He was shouting aloud; snatches of ribald song, language of incredible filth burst from his lips. They were fifty yards from the hillocks now, and with a shout of "Come on, you lads—give 'em hell!" Burroughs shot forward. The short dash carried them on to the mounds, they surged over and were among the Chinamen, hacking, cutting, striking—till quite suddenly the mounds were empty, and in the distance blue-clad figures scudded for cover, followed by rapid fire from the troop.

And then, five yards from Burroughs, a figure rose quietly from the ground, his rifle at the slim. Burroughs had a vivid vision of gnarled hands clenched tensely on a rifle stock, had barely time to raise his pistol. With the report of the rifle came the sharper crack of his own weapon. The Chinaman stood motionless for a long moment, then crumpled suddenly forward, to raise himself painfully on one elbow a second later. The little pig-eyes stared long and steadily at Burroughs. Then a look of savage satisfaction overspread the leathery face, and the shaved head dropped forward.

Burroughs lay luxuriously on the long grass, a tranquil satisfaction pervading him. He was a man once more. Never again would he be ridden by that ghastly fear which choked his voice and tied his limbs, and made his days and nights a hell of thought. He reviewed again the dreadful unexpectedness of that volley in the jungle, and smiled at the thought of the ineptitude that had overcome him. Then the advance toward the Chinese position across the plain, with those wild, killing thoughts possessing him, the exhilarating dash over the mounds, and the shock of hand-to-hand fighting. Lastly, the Chinese rifleman whom he had killed and who had shot at him. How had he missed? He mused amazedly. The range had been five yards, perhaps less; and the Chinaman had aimed so long and so steadily while Burroughs struggled with his pistol. How in the name of all the guardian angels, had he missed? Perfect peace possessed him, an exaltation of spirit, which, lazily analysing, he attributed to reaction from the blood lust which had overcome him.

Edwardes was coming toward the mounds now. The look of professional satisfaction with which he viewed the carnage changed to quick anxiety as he caught sight of Burroughs's prostrate figure.

Burroughs smiled to himself as his mind jumped to the cause. He would speak, and reassure him.

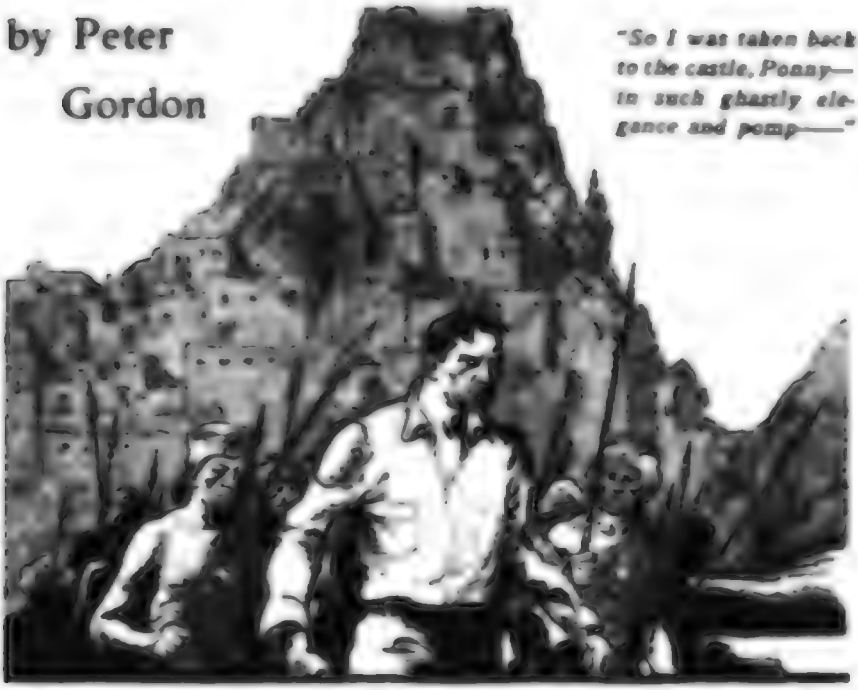
"Hullo, old man! Good scrap, wasn't it?"

But Edwardes did not answer. It was almost as if he had not heard. As he came nearer, his look of distress deepened. He dropped on one knee beside his friend, and placed a hand over his heart. Then he rose wearily, and his face had grown suddenly older. He turned to the orderlies behind him. He was speaking now, and quick, freezing horror came to Burroughs.

"Here, Man Sing," Edwardes was saying. "Send for the stretcher bearers, and you, Haste Thapa, tell the subadar to take charge of No. 1 troop. Burroughs sahib is dead."

Anything CAN Happen!

by Peter Gordon



"So I was taken back to the castle, Ponny—in such ghastly elegance and pomp——"

I WAS standing in front of the long line of bookmakers on the Calcutta race course, wondering whether to be a fool and bet, or to be sensible and refrain, when I caught sight of Jimmy Carew hurrying away from the stands toward the exit. As I had not seen him for some months, and had believed him to be somewhere at the back of beyond in Tyukan, I ran after him and caught him at the gate.

"Ponny!" he gasped. (My name is Ponsonby.) "My dear man! I thought you were home on leave."

"Just got back," I told him. "But I thought you were in Tyukan, making a railway to the new oil fields."

"I was," he answered, with a rather grim smile. I thought. "But as for the railway—it'll be another ten years before they get a line through that God forsaken country."

"But why back so soon?" I asked. "You told me just before you left that you'd be there at least a year. What happened?"

"Ah!" he said, and glanced quickly over his shoulder. "I'm not in Tyukan, old man, but I'm in the deuce of a fix instead. Do you see that flat-faced, pug-nosed little monkey over there?" he went on, flashing a look at an ugly little man, like a Gurkha in civilian clothes, who was leaning against the corner of the grandstand

smoking a cigarette. "D'you see that little yellow-skinned devil?"

I told him that I saw the gentleman in question.

"He's shadowing me," said Jimmy in a stage whisper. "He shadows me day and night, confound him! He seemed interested in the last race, so I was just trying to slip away when you came up. And there's the little blighter again," he finished with a weary sigh.

I was completely mystified. What had the tall, handsome, easy-going Jimmy Carew, the beloved bachelor friend of all the pretty married women in Calcutta, done to be shadowed day and night by a nasty little nondescript native like that?

"Come for a drive with me, Jimmy—I've lost as much as I can afford for one day—and tell me all about it," I suggested. "We'll take a run out to Tollygunge, and perhaps shake off your persistent friend."

"Don't you believe it," he replied despondently. "Might as well try to shake off a hot-weather thirst as that little devil."

He came along to my car, nevertheless, and settled down beside me while I threaded her through the tangle of motors, *gharries*, prancing ponies with swearing syces, and the motley crowd of pedestrians—British and native soldiers, fat babus, bearded Mussulmans, sweetmeat vendors crying their wares, Eurasians with their overdressed womenfolk, beggars, and frowning fakirs that hung about on the dusty road outside the race course. For where the races are, there will the hundred and one nationalities, creeds, and colors which compose the population of India be gathered together.

As we repassed the gate in the car I cast a quick glance at Jimmy's shadower. He was still smoking placidly by the corner of the grand stand, apparently absorbed in ticking off horses on his race card with a pencil. But I had my doubts about that later on, and thought it more probable that he had been jotting down the number of my car, and possibly a few notes about my own personal appearance into the bargain.

"Now," I said to Jimmy, as we left the traffic behind and shot forward along the straight road to Tollygunge, "tell me all about it."

Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I thought he looked worried and thinner than usual, and I noticed a little droop at the corner of his mouth which was something new.

"Go on, Jimmy," I urged, as he still hesitated. "You know you can trust me, surely?"

"Don't talk rot!" he said. "It's not that at all. Well, it's like this——"

Then he came out with the whole strange story, the while we purred along through Tollygunge, and miles beyond, before he had finished.

"You know I was sent up to make a preliminary survey for the proposed new railway?" I nodded. "There were three of us. Parme, the engineer from the Bombay side, and Brunner, a medico. His job was to study the country for prevalent diseases, drinking water, and all that sort of thing, for the army of workmen that'll be going up there when they start leveling and laying the line.

"As you know, Tyuksa is more or less explored—as much as any country as thick in forest as hairs on a monkey's back can be explored—but beyond it, to the east, is unknown country.

"Well, we decided to go to what will be the far end of the line first, and work back toward home. We did go to the far end first—and there

our little camp was swooped on by a crowd of savage little devils like the one who's shadowing me."

"All killed but you?" I ejaculated.

"No. Haven't you read the papers?" he asked, surprised.

"Been on board ship the last fortnight," I reminded him. "There was nothing in the wireless about it."

"Oh, I forgot. Not important enough for that, I expect. Mr. Parne and Beamer were out shooting. They got back, and are up in Simla now, agitating for a punitive expedition to be sent. But they won't get one; it's too far away."

"Go on," I said, as he paused.

"I was taken prisoner, and carted off on a five days' journey through a wild forest country of steep cliffs and deep nullahs—nearly did me in. I can tell you the pace those little devils traveled—until we got to an extraordinary cliff city they called Robut. Houses and temples and palaces and all the rest of it, cut clean out of the solid side of the cliff.

"This place Robut is the capital of the country—the only town, I think—and what d'you think, Ponny? It's ruled over by a queen, a veiled woman who lives in a rock palace that fairly took my breath away.

"I was taken to sleep the night in a sort of cave prison—and I was well guarded, I assure you—and the next day they marched me to the palace to be shown to the queen."

"Hold on a bit," I interrupted. "Tell us about the palace."

"Oh, a barbaric sort of place. Great gloomy rock chambers lit by torches and weird draperies and hangings appearing here and there out of the shadows.

"As I was saying, I was led into the presence of the queen—the *Prah*, they called her—where she sat in a lofty pillared hall on a big stone throne, with about a thousand flickering torches all around it on a low dais.

"She was veiled, all except her eyes—amber eyes, startling sort of eyes, Ponny, that made me thrill, though I was her prisoner—but I could see that she was tall and slim and graceful. She was dressed in some green gauzy sort of stuff which showed the lines of her figure distinctly in the torchlight.

"She gave an order that I was to be left alone with her—they all spoke *Tyuki*, which I know fairly well—and my guards cleared out, after shaking their spears at her in salute.

"'White man,' she said in a low but clear voice, looking at me with those eyes of hers till I felt hot and cold all over, 'my people tell me that you are one of those who seek to bring the fire-carriages to the borders of my country.'

"I bowed, wondering how it was she was so well informed.

"'And I,' she went on, flashing those strange eyes at me, 'do not wish the fire-carriages to come.'

"'But what possible harm can they do, since they will not cross into your borders?' I asked her, surprised at her vehemence.

"'They will bring evil men whose god is money, who will make my people work like slaves, who will introduce strange customs and doctrines, who will send their priests here to turn my people from the true worship,' was her answer, and not without a good deal of truth to it, you'll admit.

"'And what is the true worship, O Queen?' I asked, humbling myself before her in my ignorance.

"Her reply fairly startled me.

"'I am the true worship,' she cried. 'You know me as the Queen of Ro-

but, white man, but I am more than that—I am the *Prah*, which means goddess."

"There you have it, Penny, in a nutshell. She was the queen and the goddess all rolled into one.

"Well, we talked away for a long time, I standing there at the foot of the dais while she leaned back at ease among the mass of cushions on the throne, and the gist of the conversation was that she had sent for me to tell me that my life would be spared if I would make a solemn promise to stop the railway being built."

"Good Lord!" I burst out. "That was a poser for you!"

"Wasn't it? Fancy me, James Carew, a humble and temporary servant of the Great East India Railway Company, giving them an order that their new line, their pet dream, wasn't to be built! I tried to explain it to her, to point out how wildly impossible it was even to contemplate such a thing, but I suppose she'd got it into her head that I was the owner of the damned railway, and she'd had her say, and what she said in that place went."

"What did you do then?"

"I? Nothing. I simply told her perfectly straight that as I should be quite unable to fulfill any such promise, I wasn't going to make one—not even to save my life."

"Surely that was carrying honesty a bit far in the circumstances, wasn't it?" I suggested.

"My dear fellow," he said heatedly, "Honesty be hanged! Do you think I would be alive now, telling you all this, if I had promised? I should have been murdered as soon as they saw the work on the line going on—by the little yellow devil you saw at the races."

"Then how did you get away?" I demanded.

"Ah! That's the kernel inside the nut," said Jimmy. "Listen.

"I was taken back to my prison, and the next day was brought before the *Prah* again. Again she repeated her offer, again I refused it. Back I went to the prison. The next day the same, and the next, and the next, until I began to get the idea that the lady didn't want to put me to death at all, if she could help it—I did my best to be extra pleasant to her at these interviews, as you can imagine, seeing that she held my life in her slim little hands—but that she was too proud, or too afraid of her priests, to alter the conditions she had made.

"Now comes the most astounding part of all," he went on. "After about a week of this I was getting pretty fed up, when one night a man I hadn't seen before came into my cell. You must understand that my guards and all the people I had seen about the streets in my daily pilgrimages to the palace were little yellow fuik, more like Japs than anything else, but once or twice I had seen a few tall, well set up men and women in the chambers and corridors of the palace.

"This man who now came to me was the latter sort—a fine, brown-skinned man, obviously of the same race as the *Prah* herself—quite different from the common people. He explained to me that it was the *Prah's* order that I should visit her that night in secret (I had only gone to the palace by day up to that time, and under strong escort), and that I was to change into the clothes he had brought with him in a bundle.

"Only too thankful for some new development, and to get out of my tattered old khaki suit, I agreed readily enough, and in a few minutes I was walking through the streets with my tall companion,

dressed, like him, in a kind of minor rajah's outfit of dark red silk and gilt sandals. In this absurd fancy dress I was led into the presence of the *Prah*, and there the fellow left me.

"'White man,' she began, as she always did, 'I have decided to honor you above all men. Be careful how you receive this honor, and think well before you refuse this last and final offer that I make in my desire to save your life.' I bowed low, wondering what was coming.

"Try to picture the scene, Ponny. A vast rock chamber, the roof supported by rough-hewn pillars of the natural, undisturbed stone. Curtains and draperies covered with fantastic Eastern designs hanging on the walls and from the ceiling. The great stone throne at one end, on the dais, and lit by goodness knows how many flickering torches. And then, in that strange place of dancing shadows, myself in red silk fancy dress facing the veiled woman of the wonderful eyes, reclining among the cushions on the throne in her almost transparent green robe.

"I bowed low before her, and said: 'I listen, O Queen, and am gratified to learn from your own gracious lips that it is your desire to save my life. Pray tell me how I am to be honored above all men.'

"'Thus,' she answered quickly, and as she said it tore away the veil that concealed her face.

"I tell you, Ponny, I fairly gasped. She was beautiful, and she knew it. Golden-brown skin, with the lightest pink flush in either cheek, a nose like a Grecian goddess, and scarlet lips—rouged, of course—which parted in a smile at my undisguised amazement, making her white teeth flash in the torchlight.

"'And thus,' she said again, sweeping off the second veil, which was about her head, and a great cascade of hair, black as night, came tumbling about her shoulders. Then she stood up.

"'Am I beautiful, white man?' she asked softly.

"'You are very beautiful, O Queen,' I answered a little unsteadily.

"'Have you ever beheld a woman so beautiful as I?' she demanded.

"'I have never beheld a woman so beautiful, O Queen,' I said truthfully. 'And I am indeed honored.'

"'More so than you yet know, white man,' she caught me up quickly. 'For I have chosen you to be my husband.'"

"Good Lord, Jimmy!" I ejaculated, and nearly swerved the car into a tree.

"It's true," he said quietly. "She informed me that I could be her husband or be put to death that very night; it was up to me to choose."

"What in the world did you do?"

"Ponny," he said rather shamefacedly, "I lost my head and made a thundering fool of myself. I mounted the dais, took the queen-goddess in my arms, and gave her the best kiss she'd ever had in her life."

"And that did it," I grinned, glancing at him sideways.

"As you say, Ponny," he went on gloomily, "that did it—did it properly."

"How did you get out of the marriage business after that?" I asked curiously.

"I didn't get out of it, Ponny," he answered, to my amazement. "That's just it—I didn't get out of it."

"You don't mean——" I began.

He turned in his seat and put a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"I mean that I was married to the woman that very night, with all the pomp and ceremony of a barbaric

wedding. Yes, you may well look surprised. You are talking to a king, or a prince consort, rather."

"I say, you're not stringing me along, Jimmy, are you?" I said sharply, after a moment of stupefied silence.

"Not a bit. There was no way out of it. I could see she meant every word she said. It was death or marriage for me, and—well, as I hate death, I chose marriage."

"But what are you doing here? Why are you being shadowed? Did you do a bolt?"

"Listen. I saw that I'd burned my boats, and made up my mind to take what the gods had given me—and not too bad a gift it appeared at the time, mind you—so I decided to stick by what I'd done. We spent a wonderful week's honeymoon at her summer palace, a sort of gaudy wooden bungalow up in the hills, and then we returned to Robut."

"Go on," I said impatiently.

"You won't laugh at me, Ponny, or be disgusted with me, will you, when I tell you that I fell in love with her?" he asked a little anxiously.

"But why not?" I managed to say. "She was your wife."

"All right—don't rub it in!" he flung at me irritably.

I gave him a cigarette to soothe his nerves, and when he had lighted it he went on:

"When we got back she told me that it had been decided at a council of state that our marriage must be solemnized (my word, not hers) according to my laws as well as according to theirs. The long and the short of it was, after a mighty lot of arguing on my part, that I was to come back here, to Calcutta, get hold of a divine, and take him back with me so that the marriage ceremony could be performed all over again in English."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "I see now. But why this shadowing business?"

"So that I shan't try to clear out," he replied tersely.

"Then I gather, from your desire to shake off the gentleman we saw on the course, that you want to clear out," I ventured.

He turned round in his seat and looked at me fixedly.

"You're right, Ponny," he said slowly. "I do, and I'll tell you why. The day after we got back to Robut, I was politely separated from the queen, and taken to another wing of the palace (if you can call places carved out of solid rock 'wings'), and there introduced to four young men I hadn't seen before—all fine, tall Robutus like those about the palace. I was rather surprised to hear that I was expected to live with these gentlemen, until I learned that they were the queen's other husbands. I was simply to be one of a sort of male harem, awaiting the queen's pleasure. When I discovered that, Ponny, I can tell you my blood fairly boiled.

"But this time I didn't lose my head or go for them or kick up a fuss, but lay quiet for the two days it took the officials to make preparations for my long journey. During that time I never set eyes on the queen, but the day I left she sent me a verbal message bidding me make good speed and wishing me a safe return."

He stopped, and for a long time sat silent, staring at the road ahead.

"Well, what happens now?" I asked at length.

"I shall risk it, Ponny, sooner or later," he replied. "See these?" He drew from his pocket a pair of steel knuckle-dusters. "The day I go near a steamer or a railway station, that little yellow devil will try to knife me. It'll depend on whether I can

use these quicker than he can his knife."

"But why not now, in this car?" I suggested. "I can take you to an outlying station where you can get a local train, and pick up the Bombay express somewhere up the line."

He shook his head decidedly.

"No, old man," he said. "Awfully decent of you to make the offer, but I dislike the idea of being murdered so much that I won't transfer the wrath of Rohut to your head. If I were to get away with your help, I've little doubt that you'd be in for it. When I decide to quit I shall do so on my own."

So I took him back to his hotel, and left him there, after making him promise that he would send for me if he happened to change his mind.

TWO MONTHS later I got a letter from him, sent from London. This is the part referring to his Rohut adventure:

"I risked it two days after my drive with you in your car. I booked a passage in a B. I. boat, and went aboard at Calcutta. Sure enough, as I was stepping on to the gangway the little yellow devil appeared out of the crowd like magic. I had my hands in my pockets, with the dusters on, and got ready for it. I nearly hit him between the eyes before I realized that he held in his hand, not a knife, but a letter. Very warily I took it with my left hand, and with a salaam, the little blighter let me go on board.

"Although I can talk *Tyuki* I can't read a word of it. So I was in ignorance of the contents of the letter till I got home, when I took it to a professor of Oriental languages to translate for me.

"When the learned professor handed me his translation, he looked at me mighty queerly, which is hardly to be wondered at, as you will see.

"Here it is:

"'White man—A *yuin*, my faithful servant, has instructions to give you this letter only when he is certain that you do not intend to return to Rohut. If you decide to leave me, who I think you have loved, I do not complain, because you are white and I am brown, and because I love you.

"'All I have done I have done to save your life. The idea of marriage was mine—to save you from the death my priests had designed for you. The idea of the white priest to marry us again was mine—to enable you to escape from Rohut, if such should be your wish.

"'By the law of my people, the husbands of the *Prah* must live apart from her except for the first week after marriage—each husband being assigned only one month in each year in which she may call him to her.

"'I am young, so as yet I have but four husbands, apart from yourself; but before I come to full age I must, by the law, have twelve husbands—one for each month in the year.

"'Having some wisdom, I saw that such a life would be distasteful to you, so I have given you this chance to escape.

"'If, on the other hand, your desire for me is strong enough to make you return to Rohut with your priest—then we will spend such a month together each year that it will wipe out the eleven months in which we must live apart. If such is the case, you will never read this letter.

"'But my love is the love of a woman of noble birth, for I have a long line of ancestors—conquerors who came to this country from the deserts of the far west thousands of years ago. My love desires, above

all, your happiness, and if your happiness lies in freedom—then take your freedom, white man, and think no more of a lonely queen bound in obedience to the laws of her people, yet able, with a woman's cunning, to save the life of a white man who looked upon her for a little while with love in his eyes.

"The *Prah* sends you greeting and the good luck of the gods. The woman you held in your arms when the moon smiled upon the hills, when the mist wrapped the valleys in sleep, when the soft night wind stirred across the forests, sends you the love of a woman.'

"What do you think of that, Penny? If it wasn't for those eleven other husbands, I'm hanged if I wouldn't go back to her."

I agree with him.

A Canadian Incident

THREE years ago James McLachlan disappeared mysteriously, and the local police could find no clew as to whether he was living or dead. But the matter still puzzled one of the Scot's friends, and when a stage mind reader invited members of his audience to concentrate on questions they wished to have answered, Willie Taylor framed a mental question.

"What happened to Jim McLachlan?"

He was amazed to hear the mind reader answer:

"The gentleman on the aisle, about the middle, there. The man you are thinking of, sir, was murdered. There was foul play, and the body will soon be found."

This business startled Taylor. He went round after the show and induced the mind reader to assist the police by going with a constable to the McLachlan homestead. When they reached the barn, the diviner said decisively:

"The man was killed here. His body is buried near by."

Nothing more was done then, but on their way back to the police station they met John Schumacher, the dead man's partner.

"He can tell you," whispered the mind reader to the constable.

Schumacher was asked to go back to the station and be questioned. He finally avowed he had killed McLachlan in the barn and buried him close by. He pleaded he had acted in self-defense when attacked with a shovel.

The thing was moving—it seemed to be leaving the screen——

From the Wells of the Brain

by Paul Ernst

CARSON stared nervously about the dimly lit room. It was long and narrow. One end was bare. The other, where he was sitting, was cluttered with odd apparatus.

On the wall of the bare end was an eight-foot square of dull black fabric—like a moving-picture screen, save that it was black instead of silver-gray.

The thin whine of a dynamo increased the creepiness of the room's atmosphere.

"What I'm about to show you," said Professor Wheeler, "has probably never been seen before. I say *probably*. It is possible that some of the ancients, in their study of magic, came close to my secret."

Carson stared at him.

"Yes." Wheeler's voice was indistinct, as though he were thinking aloud. "It is possible that a few of the old-time 'witches' and 'wizards' came close. But without a modern laboratory they could not have seen as more than fog wraps the clear substance we will view tonight."

Carson had an idea the present experiment had something to do

with electrical energy as applied to nerve reflections. Those were two fields in which Wheeler specialized—neurology and basic electrical energy. Oddly dissimilar subjects——

Wheeler's voice, sharp in the silence, broke in on his musing.

"You know, of course, that each human being is a walking generator? That the brain generates a small amount of electricity, and that nerve impulses are electrical in nature?"

Carson nodded. Professor Wheeler began to walk up and down beside Carson's chair.

"You've heard the theory that everything is electrical in origin, of course. Matter is electrical energy slowed down so you can see it and touch it. Life, the life spark, is a form of electricity. Thought is electrical energy generated by the brain.

"Thought, life, matter! All three are basically the same, made of the same stuff. You begin to see where such an equation could lead?"

Carson shook his head.

"I'm afraid I don't."

Wheeler went on:

"See, now: thought is electrical energy. Life is electrical energy. Matter is the same, slowed down. Therefore, thought is potentially *living matter!*

"Thought is living matter." He almost whispered the words. "Living, breathing matter! For thought is electricity which only needs to be slowed down in movement, to be made into solid substance. A terrific equation! A monstrous one! But an equation that I have proved sound! You see what it means?"

His voice soared vibrantly.

"It means that every human being gives birth to life with every thought he thinks. For his thoughts are living creatures, born in his brain, passing off to invisible lives of their own. What a procession! Pouring from the brain like smoke! Kindly thoughts and fiendish ones, beautiful ones and horrible ones, the good and the bad—all marching side by side from the brain that bore them!"

"You can really do this thing?" Carson asked in a low tone. "You can actually turn thought into living substance?"

"I have done it," said Wheeler, eyes blazing.

With the words, he switched out the lights. But in an instant the room was illuminated again, by reflections from the floodlights focused on the black screen.

Carson stared at Wheeler, and saw that the professor was putting something on his head. A hysterical impulse to laugh rose in him.

The object Wheeler was fastening to his head looked like the many-wired things women put on when they get a permanent wave. It was a sort of metal bowl, placed upside down on the skull, with wires leading to something that resembled a portable radio aerial.

"This steps up the faint impulse of thought," said the professor, in a tone that banished all impulse to laugh. "It increases the voltage of thought approximately a million times."

Beside Carson's chair was a sort of hose nozzle of copper. It was mounted on a swivel, with a heavy power cable trailing behind like a hose. Wheeler aimed this at the exact center of the square, as if to spray it with an invisible stream. Carefully he adjusted a multiple switch near by.

"This," he said, his voice brittle, "causes thought to materialize: it slows it down to a point where it becomes visible to human eyes."

He touched another switch. The thin scream of the dynamo rose in volume. Simultaneously the glare of the floodlights faded a little as power was drained from them.

"Now," his voice cracked out, "watch!"

Hardly breathing, Carson gazed at the screen. He was about to see something few men had ever dreamed of seeing—what thoughts look like.

A slight worm of movement appeared, glowing, in the black square's center.

At first the thing was merely a quivering speck of luminosity, like a cloud wisp with a light behind it. Then it began to grow. It spread till it filled the screen. And now it was a restless, shimmering sea, with slow-rolling undulations.

"It is vague and formless," Carson heard Wheeler say crisply, "even as much thought is vague and formless. Only strong thoughts take definite shapes."

"You can talk while you do this?" demanded Carson in some amazement.

"Oh, yes. It disturbs the image because it diverts the thought. See——" Carson looked, and saw that the formless sea was rippling like a pond in which a stone is thrown. "But I can talk and act as freely as I wish."

"Is all thought stuff like that?"

"No. I can make it as clear as you please. For example, I'll think of somebody we both know. Name somebody."

"Your brother."

"Very well."

The image on the screen ceased rippling. It began to change. It drew up into itself. Shoulders and chest were formed. A face spread into being. In a few seconds an image of a man appeared.

An image? It seemed a solid object, standing out a foot or more from the black square!

Carson's eyes bulged as the facsimile of Martin Wheeler, dead two years, confronted him.

"Martin to the life!" he gasped.

"Not Martin," a voice corrected him. "Simply the thought of Martin. A twin brother, in a way, born of a brain instead of a woman's body."

That voice! Martin's, surely! And coming from the screen! Was Wheeler descending to the cheap trickery of ventriloquism?

A thin smile passed over Wheeler's lips.

"Yes, it was the figure talking." The figure on the screen blurred and wavered as he spoke. "That is, the figure's lips fashioned the words and its vocal cords gave them sound. The message, of course, came from my brain."

"Lips? Vocal cords?" faltered Carson.

"Certainly. Didn't I tell you I could make thought materialize? That image is three-dimensional. The substance is thin—you could easily poke your hand through it—but it is solid, nevertheless. And it has all the capabilities of a human being, because my thought was of a human being."

For a while Wheeler reduplicated the first experiment. Carson saw his mother, five hundred miles away, seem to smile at him from the screen. He saw Wheeler's father, like the brother, long dead.

Some of the details were imperfect, because Wheeler's memory pictures did not match Carson's, but that made no difference. Wheeler had proved that thought was life, and that he could clothe it with matter!

"This is child's play," said

Wheeler impatiently. "The most interesting thing I have discovered, and that which will be of most benefit to science, is the materializing of the more secret and hidden thoughts. Things crawling up from the black wells of the hidden lower brain. Some of the most beautiful things, Carson, and—some of the most damnable! But watch!"

After every figure materialized, against the screen by Wheeler, the formless, softly gleaming sea—frequently patched with vague pictures of people and things—had spread across the square again. With Wheeler's last words, the sea gathered into itself once more and began to flow into definite shape.

Carson sighed when the shape was completed.

Over the screen soared a form of exquisite beauty. A human-seeming thing, robed in white, that moved on great white wings. Its face was ineffably sweet, more kindly and gracious than any human face ever was.

Then the glorious image shattered and broke, seeming to flee in despair at the cynical, lightly contemptuous tone of Wheeler's next words.

"My conception of an angel. A rather impractical figure, I'm afraid."

His voice grew somber.

"Now for the other side of the picture—a materialization of some of the creeping, hidden thoughts we all have but seldom put into words. A glimpse into the foul, blind, animal brain of man!"

Breathlessly Carson watched the screen. And the slow materialization that followed made him grip the arms of his chair in amazement and fear.

The usual sea of formless thought succeeding the angel changed character. At first the change was hard to define. It was simply that, from being an inoffensive, meaningless ocean of mist and soft color, it became a sort of terrible quagmire.

A seething surface of slime! Red began to color it, lurid and shifting. The surface of the ooze began to heave with a more than regular movement—as though eyeless, loathsome things burrowed sullenly, near the top.

And now the surface began to rise here and there, as vaguely seen, sluglike things appeared for just a second in one part or another of the quagmire. It became apparent that a whole world of horrible life tunneled and slid with blind, sluggish venom in the quaking slime—which itself seemed imbued with a low form of life.

Carson's hands clenched around the chair arms more tightly. How clear this thing was! He had the conviction that if he walked toward the black screen and stepped into the terrible ooze, he would be swallowed up forever.

"And that," said Wheeler crisply, "is what fills the subconscious mind of each of us, just under the thin shell of civilization. Not a very pretty sight!"

"It seemed so clear, so solid," was all Carson could say. His hands ached from their grip on the chair arms. "Do things always grow more solid and real as your experiments go on—does their outline become clearer?"

"No, it is not that. The last was so clear because it was evil. Evil thought always takes on more substance, is always easier to materialize, than good. Why, I cannot say."

"But that would seem to indicate that evil is stronger than good!" protested Carson.

Professor Wheeler shrugged.

"The moral side of this work doesn't interest me in the least. I have found that evil thought materializes with more clarity than good. Very well—I experiment mainly with evil. And the results! I have solidified thoughts against that screen which you would swear could walk from this room and join the world of real flesh and blood. I'll show you one such now. I have called it into being many times, because results are so satisfactory."

Once more Carson found his eyes turning toward the screen. He did not want to look. Something told him he was about to be shocked to the soul. But a power stronger than his will made him stare toward the still faintly visible quagmire that had chilled his blood a moment ago.

As the shapeless sea of ordinary thought had gathered into other, vague images, so now this quivering jelly of formless evil began to take definite outline. And as it did so, Carson half rose from his chair.

"Easy, Carson," came Wheeler's reassuring voice. "It can't hurt you. The instant it moves from in front of the screen and out of the rays of the energy retarder, it fades into nothingness."

Carson forced himself to sink back in his chair, forced his eyes to dwell on the crouching form silhouetted against the black square.

It was a human thing, in a way, and yet it was as far from being truly human as is the amœboid slime in the black depths of a jungle swamp.

It looked a little like a gigantic ape. But it was hairless, with a sickly white pelt that glistened dully, as had glistened the viscous surface of the quagmire. It had arms like thighs, ending in hands thrice as big as ordinary hands; and these hands were half flexed in a throttling gesture, like great talons. The face was slit across by a gash of a mouth in which showed rotting yellow fangs. The nose was simply two pits in the surface of the flat face. The eyes were tiny, blood-shot wells that glittered in the floodlights with the lust to kill.

The thing glared at its creator and at Carson with an equally ferocious hatred, pallid lips writhing back from yellow fangs. It crouched as though to spring. As it did so, Carson felt the hair rise on his neck.

As it crouched, with knuckles touching the floor as the knuckles of a gorilla touch the ground when it stoops, the rasp of its flesh against the floor boards could be plainly heard. This was no thing of mist and half substance. This was as solid as Carson himself!

"A murder thought," said Wheeler, his voice hushed.

This time, Carson noted with bated breath, the thought figure did not waver as its creator spoke. It remained as clear and solid as before.

"This has always been the most satisfactory form I could materialize," said Wheeler. "To-night it is more perfect than ever before."

Carson moistened his dry lips. He was not a coward. But this thing that snarled and slavered with a face all the more dreadful for being nearly human completely unnerved him.

"Dematerialize it!" he begged. "If I look at it any longer——"

"I will," said Wheeler. "And quickly!"

He himself turned a little white as the nightmare thing began to move slowly toward them, away from the screen. Each step rasped out clearly. The snarling grew in volume, till the room quivered with it.

"I believe," the professor breathed in awe, "the thing might actually do us harm, if it could reach us while the energy-retarding rays were still playing on it and keeping it a solid body. As it is, with the rays turned off——"

Hastily he snapped the switch on the nozzle pointing toward the screen. The high note of the dynamo sank to its former thin scream. He snapped off the floodlights, walked in the darkness to the wall switch, and turned on the ordinary room lights.

"Amazing how clearly the murder thought came to-night," he said. His back was turned to Carson. He looked anxiously over the complicated and delicate apparatus wired to the copper nozzle. Satisfied that it had stood the strain of the experiment all right, he straightened up, still with his back to Carson and the room.

"The other images," he said, reaching up to take from his head the many-wired helmet, "were so tenuous that you could almost see through them at times. But this last seemed as weighty and real as though cast in iron. Don't you think so?"

Carson did not answer.

The professor laid the helmet carefully on a bench beside the rack which contained the majority of the vacuum and cathode tubes used in the experiment.

"Don't you think so?" he repeated.

Still Carson made no sound. A little surprised, Wheeler turned to look at him.

"Good God!" he whispered.

Carson was rigid in his chair, like a person in a trance, his eyes glazing a little as they glared toward the black screen. And advancing toward him, picking a soft-footed way among the floodlights, was the monstrous creation of Wheeler's brain.

Every drop of blood drained from the professor's face, leaving it a white mask of horror. Horror—and incredulity!

The energy-retarding rays were cut off. The thought amplifier was disconnected. The floodlights, designed to throw into the boldest possible relief the thin materializations of the usual thoughts, were turned out. Everything that had been cunningly concentrated to bring this creature into solid existence had been thrown out of gear.

But the murder thought had not dematerialized!

The hideous, apelike thing was still there, ponderous and solid on the wooden flooring. And slowly it was coming closer. Closer! With short, almost leisurely, steps, as though knowing there was no escape for its two victims, it was traversing the long room. The men could hear the rasp of its breath through its pits of nostrils.

"It—it isn't possible——"

Wheeler passed his hand before his eyes, and stared again.

"It can't have substance—existence! It isn't possible!"

But it was possible. For there the beast was, snarling, extending its enormous hands in murderous eagerness, creeping slowly toward them.

"For God's sake," panted Carson, "stop the thing!"

"I can't." It was a groan that came from Wheeler's lips.

He began to shudder. Perspiration stood out on his skin as he realized his helplessness.

He had admitted that he had called this thing into being more often than any other thought because it materialized more readily and easily. Had continued appear-

ances given it a growing life and substance of its own? Or were other, more subtle, factors at work here?

"I can't stop it! It's got beyond me!"

Strength returned suddenly to Carson's limbs. In the middle of the side wall of the room was the door leading out. Abruptly, desperately, he sprang for it.

Quickly as he moved, his leap seemed slow compared to the darting movement of the monster. It reached the door ten feet before him and crouched there, fangs bared and clawing hands extended.

Carson backed to the far end of room, rejoining Wheeler. Together they faced the beast. It moved toward them once more, coming more quickly now, slithering over the floor on distorted feet and occasionally stooping to support some of its weight with its padded knuckles.

Wheeler cried out like a hunted animal. He began to run back and forth across the end of the room, taking little, demented steps. Then, with another cry that sounded like nothing human, he leaped for the copper nozzle of the energy retarder.

What he thought he was going to do with it can never be guessed. Whatever it was, he had no chance.

With his move, the monster sprang. Both reached the nozzle at the same time. The beast roared insanely. It lifted Wheeler in one great hand, held him suspended for an instant, then smashed him down into the heart of the delicate apparatus he had evolved. There was a crashing of glass.

Instinctively Carson raised a chair high above his head, and ran toward the raging monster. With a crash he brought the chair down on the hairless, loathsome back.

Quick as light, one huge hand whipped back and caught him by the throat. He felt himself raised in mid-air like a helpless kitten and hurled to one side.

He hit the floor on head and shoulders. In an instant the hell of noise—the snarling of the beast, the smashing of intricate equipment, the frenzied kicking of Wheeler's heels on the floor as the life was choked from him—faded into the blank of unconsciousness.

It could only have been a few seconds before he came to. He sprang up, arms held defensively before him.

"Wheeler," he gasped. "Wheeler!"

There was no answer. The room, silent now as the grave, resounded only to the shrillness of his own voice. He leaped to the side of the still form by the copper nozzle, but he might have saved the effort. There was no need for hurry.

The apelike thing was gone—either out into the night or back to the realm of invisibility from which it had been called.

And Wheeler——

The professor lay beside the wreck of his apparatus, a motionless, twisted thing. He lay on his chest, with arms and legs outspread, like a broken doll. But, though he lay face down, his head was twisted on his shoulders so grotesquely that his sightless eyes stared straight up at the ceiling.

"The moral side of this work doesn't interest me. I have found that evil thought materializes with more clarity than good. So I experiment mainly with evil."

Such had been the words of the man who now lay dead at his feet. With their fateful ring still in his ears, Carson turned from the broken, twisted body and stumbled toward the door.

Don Mackinder's Model

by

F. S. Howard-Burleigh

My Voice Echoed Back to Me—But She Did Not Answer——

CONINGSBY was a fellow member of mine at the Eclectic Club; a gentle, vague, unpractical creature, given to the writing of philosophical treatises and to the buying of odd houses in different parts of the country. He would buy, and convert, and live in a place with great enthusiasm for a time, and then, when the novelty wore off, he would rent it, generally at a thoroughly unprofitable price, and get back to town, until another house caught his fancy.

Beech Hollow was, to my mind, one of the most enchanting houses he ever bought. It was in the middle of a wood, and architecturally of no importance whatever. But it was just one of those houses which appeal to one's affections from the first sight of it.

He lived in it for a year; spent, as usual, a fortune on the garden and decorations of the house, and then got a fit of nostalgia for city streets, and let Beech Hollow to some people called Moreton.

The Moretons kept it for a year and a half—David Moreton and his wife, Nadia.

David Moreton, I gathered from Coningsby, was a tall, fair, languid giant, who bred setters. Nadia was a dark woman, very lovely, very quiet, and with an eye that disconcerted people.

Coningsby thought that Nadia had the money, although Moreton himself always paid the rent. But at the end of the first year Nadia approached him directly and asked for permission to build a conservatory at the end of the house, to open out from the hall.

Coningsby gave it. I rather fancied, from the way he spoke of her, that he had a mildly romantic crush on her, in a distant sort of way. Anyway, the conservatory was built in due course.

About this time I went on a three months' tour, and, of course, didn't see Coningsby. But when I came back I found him in a rather disgruntled mood.

We had a drink together at the club, and I asked him what was up.

He looked at me with a pessimistic eye, and said glumly:

"This business of renting houses—it's the limit. The Moretons have given up Beech Hollow. Just after they'd put a couple of thousand into that conservatory, too. Mad!"

"You've got compensation?" I hazarded. Coningsby, who is the world's worst business man, looked at me vaguely.

"Oh, no. I told him—if he'd pay the rent till some one else took it—you see——" He trailed off in his usual hazy manner.

It was a month or so before I saw him again, and then he was jubilant.

"I've rented Beech Hollow," he said, almost as soon as we met. "To the Mackinders. Pals of yours, aren't they?"

"I know Sybil very well," I said guardedly. I didn't much care for Donovan Mackinder. "What's happened to the Moretons?" I asked, remembering his description of the lovely Mrs. Moreton.

"Oh, I don't know." He looked uneasy. "She's left him, I think. He seemed a bit queer when he came to tell me that he wanted to break the lease. I gathered that she'd gone off with some one else. A friend of his. She was a beautiful woman. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very funny. Have the Mackinders moved in yet?" I asked, and he said they had. They had been in residence for three weeks, it seemed.

"I'll run down and see Sybil," I said, and Coningsby laughed.

"Sybil?" he said significantly. "Donovan's there, too, you know."

"I know. I'll have to put up with him," I retorted cheerfully.

In due course, I went down.

"Isn't it lovely, Peter?" Sybil said, coming out into the great room that ran half the length of the house, and was variously known, according to the tastes and occupations of the tenants, as the hall, the sitting room, or the studio. Donovan, being an artist, called it "the studio," of course.

"Isn't it perfect? Weren't those people fools to leave?" she demanded, her impish little face bright under her cloud of chestnut-colored hair.

I said it was perfect, and it was—so far as I could see.

So I was made free of Beech Hollow once more, and Donovan backed Sybil cordially enough when she gave me an open invitation to go down for any week-end I liked to choose.

The house was just far enough away to make a pleasant half-day trip, and I went down once or twice for lunch on Saturdays and Sundays.

Sybil was still in love with the

house, and Donovan was developing a passion for gardening. The third time I went down, he was up to his eyes in clay soil, transplanting seedlings.

Sybil was in the kitchen, as usual. And she chatted on normally enough, apparently. But, after a little time, I began to realize that all was not well with her.

There was a certain flatness in her voice, a drag in her movements, and a hint of redness round her eyes.

"What's up, Syb?" I asked bluntly. "You two aren't hard up, are you?" I knew their finances pretty well, and Don's earning capacity, like that of most artists, is a bit erratic.

"Oh, no. Not a bit. Don's doing rather well at the moment, as a matter of fact."

"Well, then?" I said, and waited.

Sybil switched away from me, went to the stove, and did something at the oven. But I had an idea that the real reason she turned away was that she did not want me to see her face.

"It's Don," she said abruptly, with her back to me. "I've lost him. It's all finished."

"Finished? Don?" I stared at her in blankest amazement. She worships Don just the least trifle more than Don adores her, which is saying a good deal.

"Yes. He's in love with some one else," she said drearily.

"Are you sure?" I couldn't believe my ears. "Who is it? Some one you know?"

"No. I've never seen her. But she's very attractive," she answered.

"But how can you know, if you haven't seen her?" I insisted.

"Don's got her on the brain," she retorted almost viciously. "Her hateful face is on every piece of paper I pick up. And he's so moony —you'd think he was a boy of eighteen, going through his first love affair. It's horrible!"

And then, with devastating suddenness, she burst into tears.

I felt helpless and distressed, and didn't know what to do with her.

"Sorry, Peter," she said, after a pause.

"How long has it been going on?" I asked. "Where does he see her?"

"I don't know. I don't spy on him," she said sharply. "You know, he's always gone out in the car a good deal, alone. I don't ask him where he goes."

It was a bad business. And when Don came in I realized that there was certainly something in what Sybil had said.

He was abstracted and distrait, and answered questions at random, started remarks which he forgot to finish, and generally behaved very oddly.

But he didn't give me the impression of a man engrossed in some guilty secret passion. He seemed to be waiting and listening for something, in a vague way.

It was an uncomfortable visit. I was almost glad when it was over. I stood in the hall with Sybil, pulling on my driving gloves and talking in the jerky way that one does when the real subject of one's thought is being kept under, when a loose sheet of paper blew down from Don's desk. Sybil picked it up and thrust it at me.

"There you are, you see," she said. "There's Don's obsession."

I looked at a rough sketch of one of the loveliest women I have ever seen.

I caught my breath. She was certainly beautiful enough to stir any man's imagination and to cause any woman uneasiness.

"Are you sure?" I said uncer-

tainly. "You say you've never seen her?"

"No. I've never seen her in the flesh. But I'm sick of the sight of her, all the same. Don can scarcely touch a pencil without her hateful face growing under it. She's got into all his stuff, and you'll find her on his blotting pad when he's been writing a letter or answering the telephone. It's hateful! I think his mind is diseased with the thought of her."

I drove home with trouble in my heart. My dear, gentle, happy Sybil in this cloudy turmoil! It was unthinkable. But it was true.

I read a good many magazines, so I'm always coming across Don's black-and-white work. I picked up a copy of one in the club one day, and was looking idly through it when his familiar touch caught my eye. He had done the illustrations for a story entitled "The Crime in the Conservatory," and, not unnaturally, had used the conservatory which opened off his own studio as a model.

The moment he had chosen to illustrate was one at which the woman in the story suddenly realized that she was in danger. He had shown her standing outlined against the dark night beyond the glass walls with a look of such terror on her face that it startled me.

My first thought was that he had done an extraordinarily good piece of work. But in the next moment that thought was swamped by another, that brought a deep unease with it. For the woman in the picture was that same woman whose rough portrait Sybil had shown me in the studio.

Sybil seemed to be right. It did begin to look as if Don was obsessed.

Some one came in then and spoke to me, and I put the magazine down. But about three days later I picked up another number, and in the illustration to one of the yarns I met the mysterious lady again.

By the time I went to Beech Hollow again I was convinced that Sybil was right. But I couldn't understand Don.

And I couldn't help Sybil. There seemed to be nothing one could do.

When I arrived for my week-end, there was an air of tension about the place which made itself manifest from the first moment. They both greeted me cordially enough, but there was something in the way they spoke to each other that made me realize that the strain was near the breaking point.

"Let's go for a walk," Sybil suggested after lunch, when Don went back to the garden. We set out, a terrier at our heels.

She was very silent, switching at the ferns with her light stick. In desperation, I ventured a question.

"How are things going? Don, I mean?"

She shot me a somber glance.

"Rotten," she said briefly, and said no more on that subject.

It wasn't very cheery. I was beginning to feel like Crusoe on his island. Then, after dinner, Sybil left us for some domestic business in the kitchen. Don and I were left on our own, smoking. After a second or two he got up restlessly and said:

"Let's go into the studio and switch on the radio, shall we? There's rather a good program on to-night."

I followed him, and in two seconds the little house was full of the strains of a colossal orchestra in full blast.

Don prowled restlessly about, seeming not to care about the music he had switched on. And ever and

anon his glance returned to his easel, on which an unfinished chalk drawing was pinned.

The orchestra faded out in a roll of drums, and there was a tumult of applause from some unseen audience. I said casually:

"How's work going? Flourishing?"

He hesitated for a moment, still staring at the unfinished drawing on the easel. Then he said shortly:

"Oh, yes. Work's all right. As much as I can do."

There was a little silence. Some woman began to sing an operatic aria, and Don snapped the switch of the set in savagely, as though the voice annoyed him.

Then suddenly he turned and faced me, and I saw that his hands were shaking and his face rather white.

"Bayliss—you're a sound fellow. I'd trust you before most people. Try to understand. Do you think I'm going crazy?"

I jumped. This was rather more than I had bargained for. And, as a matter of fact, I had been wondering, two seconds earlier, whether his moody restlessness was the sign of some incipient mental trouble.

I lied, of course. One does on these occasions. I said:

"Of course not! Why?"

"Oh—nothing." He fidgeted uneasily, and seemed disinclined to say more.

A few minutes later, with an obvious effort, he changed the subject.

"You know Coningsby, our landlord, pretty well, don't you?" he asked.

"Fairly well. He's a member of my club."

"I was wondering—— Do you think he would mind if we hauled that conservatory down?" He glanced balefully at the closed half-glass door. "I can't stand the place. Nasty, stuffy smell it's got, and it cuts half the light and air off from this room. Do you think he would mind if we had it down?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. But I really don't know. Why don't you write to him?"

"I'm going to," said Don. Just then Sybil came in with coffee.

We talked idly till bedtime, and Don seemed to grow happier and less restless as we sat there in the firelight.

I went up to the little room over the dining room at about eleven, and went to the window to draw a curtain. It was a bright night, and, as I stood there inhaling the fresh country air, I could see the trees sharply outlined against a moonlit sky, and the angle of the conservatory as it jutted out from the side of the house.

The lights were out in the hall, and I could hear Don moving about in the small room next to mine.

The night was very still and glamorous. I stood there breathing in the sweet freshness of it for two or three minutes. And then, to my surprise, I realized that I was not alone.

At first I thought what I saw through my window was a figment of my imagination, or a play of shadows cast by the moonlight as it filtered through the great apple tree to the left.

But she was real enough. She stood there looking up at me, her face clear in the moonlight, a hint of appeal in her attitude.

For a second—an eternity!—she stood there like that, looking up at my window, while I looked down at her in dumb surprise.

Before I could get over my momentary embarrassment sufficiently to speak to her, I realized with a

shock of cold surprise who she was. For this was the woman with whom Don was in love; the woman whose face haunted and drove his pencil; the woman whose shadowy, menacing personality had brought that look of tormented unhappiness to Sybil's face!

The sheer infernal impudence of it! Coming here in the garden, that was as much Sybil's as Don's, looking for Don at this hour! I gasped a little at the thought of it, and I suppose I must have shifted the focus of my gaze for a second. For when I looked again, meaning this time to ask her who she was and what she wanted, she wasn't there. The garden was empty of everything but the moonlight and the shadows.

I couldn't make it out. But I supposed that she must have realized suddenly that I wasn't Don, and got scared.

Neither Don nor Sybil said anything further on the subject while I was there. I went back to town in a clouded, uneasy frame of mind.

Two days later I lunched at the club, and found Coningsby there. He told me discontentedly that he had heard from Don, asking for permission to remove the conservatory, and that he had given it.

"I've never liked the idea of the place. Spoiled the house," he said as he buttered his toast. "But it seems mad, in a way. It cost Moreton plenty of money. By the way, I saw Moreton a few days ago. I believe he's going to marry Sally Blair. She's a fool if she takes him. He's either drinking or drugging pretty badly."

"Sally Blair?" I echoed. "But I thought he was married already?"

"She's dead." A shadow of regret crossed Coningsby's face. "That lovely woman—it's difficult to think of her as dead. But he tells me that she died in California last year. So he's free enough. But I think it's a rotten deal for Sally. Can't think what she's doing it for."

"Well, I suppose she loves him," I answered, remembering Sally Blair. "She's got money enough of her own. It can't be that."

Later on, I went to my pocketbook to take out a bill, and came across a rough sketch on a half sheet of paper that I had picked up when I was at Beech Hollow.

"Look here," I said, pushing it across to Coningsby. "You must have gotten to know the local crowd pretty thoroughly when you were down there. Who is that?"

He looked at the thing for an amazed moment, and then at me.

"That? Why, it's Nadia Moreton. Why? Where did you get it?"

"I found it on Don Mackinder's desk," I answered. "And, if that's Nadia Moreton, I certainly don't think she's dead. In fact, a few days ago she was very much alive. I saw her in the garden at Beech Hollow."

Coningsby was looking at the picture in a staggered sort of way.

"But—if she's alive—Moreton can't marry Sally Blair! It's a crime!" he said, staring at me over the paper.

"Quite," said I, chewing the thing over in my mind, and coming to no satisfactory conclusion.

The thing worried me so much that I went down to Beech Hollow yet again, the next week-end; and this time I meant to have the thing out with Don, if I could. I hate interfering, but it seemed to me that it was time to clear the air about this business.

It wasn't only Sybil. I liked Sally Blair, too, in a detached fashion; well enough to make a little inter-

ference worth while if it would save a good-natured little woman from making a hash of her life.

Don, however, made the interference easier and less embarrassing than I had feared.

"I'm glad you came," he said, almost in our first moment alone together. "If I don't talk to some one, I shall burst. And, in the nature of things, I can't talk to Syb."

"Carry on," I said.

"I think I shall have to go and see one of these mental fellows," he said, after a long, uneasy pause. "I'm going—queer."

"In what way?" I asked, watching him. He seemed normal enough, to-day; steadier, in fact, than I'd seen him for some time.

His attitude suggested to me the dogged calm of a man who has made up his mind to throw off a burden somehow, anyhow—so long as he is rid of it.

"It's this queer business—this woman," he explained, and broke off.

"You mean Nadia Moreton?" I suggested bluntly. He jumped.

"Who?" he demanded incredulously.

"Nadia Moreton," I said again. "The woman who used to live here; the woman whose face gets into every drawing you make; the woman who waits for you in the garden at midnight."

Don's face was white. He was staring at me in numb amazement.

"Nadia Moreton? So that's who she is!" he said in a strangled whisper.

There was a pause. Then he said abruptly:

"Believe in ghosts, Bayliss?"

I said I didn't, and I don't—not even now. But Don charged on without listening to me.

"It's been going on ever since we came to this accursed house," he said in a breathless sort of voice. "She's sort of grown out of the air, you might say. At first, it was no more than a dim sort of impression of a woman, not Sybil, about the place. Once or twice, I actually turned round, expecting to find her at my side. But there was nothing. Then the impression got stronger. I caught the ghost of a whiff of perfume; thought I heard a footstep; definitely heard a sigh and the sound of a voice, though I couldn't catch what it said. That's why I took to gardening so hard. I couldn't stand this room, because she was always in it. And then, one night, I saw her. She was standing in the garden, peering in through the outer door of the conservatory. I tried to go and speak to her, to ask what she wanted; but by the time I got through the two doors she had gone. It puzzled me. But it didn't frighten me. I thought she was real, you know. It was only after two or three weeks, when I'd seen her several times, and each time she'd slid away from me, that I began to think it must be something queer in my own brain—hallucinations. I'd been drawing her for ages, of course. She's so lovely. Never saw any one like her. Couldn't tell Syb that, of course." He laughed uneasily.

"Then you think she's dead? That it's her ghost you're seeing?" I asked, all my natural incredulity up in arms.

Don didn't answer. He went across to the radio and switched it on. A wave of sound flowed out into the room, and Don looked at me with a sly grin.

"Anything supernatural about that?" he demanded.

"Why, no," I answered uncertainly. "Why?"

"It's coming from Berlin," he ob-

served casually. "Supposing you were anywhere on the road, or in the air, between here and Germany—by which of your senses would you be able to intercept it?"

I was silent, a little floored.

"What's the argument?" I countered weakly.

Don switched the set off and sat down again.

"I don't know. A dim theory. That sound wave's sent out on the ether by a lot of fellows scraping fiddles in the Friedrichstrasse. It holds itself together and keeps on and comes over here, or in Paris, essentially the same; and I'm told that the wave goes on practically forever, if only we'd instruments sensitive enough to pick it up. Why shouldn't it be the same with personality? I don't know whether Nadia Moreton's alive or dead. I think she's dead. But, whether she is or not, I think she went through something in this house so sharp and terrible that it has left an impression on the ether which, for some odd reason, you and I were able to pick up; but Sybil, fortunately, wasn't. She's never seen her, so far as I know."

Sybil came in just then, and we dropped the subject. She took a cigarette and smiled across the match I lighted for her.

"Has Don told you that we are getting rid of the conservatory?" she asked. "Mr. Coningsby was awfully nice about it."

"Yes—darned expensive business," Don grunted. "I'm not sorry, of course. I hate the place. But Coningsby insists that we shall take up the floor and foundations and restore the garden to its original condition. Still, I have the money, so I don't mind."

Apparently he had some difficulty in getting the work undertaken, for when Sybil came up to town a few weeks later, for a day's shopping, she told me that the men had only been working on it for two days.

"The place is in an awful mess, with them tramping in and out," she said, laughing across the table at which we were having lunch. "Poor old Don! I must get back as early as I can and look after him. He's tearing his hair about not being able to get into the studio to work."

"He's better?" I hazarded, seeing how much brighter she seemed.

"Yes, I think he is. He's queerly excited about getting rid of the conservatory, and doesn't seem able to think about anything else. I don't know why he has taken such a dislike to it. He didn't mind it, at first."

"I suppose he found it interfered with the light for his work," I suggested. Then, as we had nearly finished our coffee, and I was clear of business for the afternoon, I offered to drive her round for her shopping.

"I'll drive you back, too, if you like," I added. "If you'll put me up for the night."

"Oh, Peter, you angel! Of course. But you'll have to wait about a bit, I'm afraid. I want to go to the Park Lane Hospital to see Letty James, and I can't rush out in ten minutes."

"Oh, that's O. K. I'll fuddle round the park or somewhere till you're ready to move on," I said cheerfully, glad to have her to myself for so long.

I dropped her at the hospital at about three o'clock, and took the car into the park for an idle saunter round. I had gone round twice when I saw Cheam, another fellow member of the club—an interesting, mildly eccentric writing man. He was with a tall man whom I did not know, but he wagged a hand at me, and I stopped.

"Hello, Bayliss. What's the tired business man doing, idling in the park at this hour?" Cheam greeted me.

I got out of the car and gave him an elusive, laughing answer. Cheam turned to the man with him, and said casually:

"I don't know if you two know each other? Moreton, do you know Bayliss? He professes to be an authority on insurance. Knows as much about it as you do about setters."

"Setters?" The word, in conjunction with his name, made me prick my ears. "You're not the Moreton who used to live at Beech Hollow?"

"The same," he said shortly.

A twinge of discomfort passed through me. I remembered that it was Nadia Moreton who was—and was not, it seemed—dead. But you know how one goes on talking, in these awkward moments, to get oneself past the snag, not thinking very carefully about what one says.

I said:

"Good Lord! What an odd coincidence! I'm going down there today."

Moreton still looked uneasy.

"Oh, you know the present tenants?" he asked in an uncertain tone.

"Yes. Great friends of mine," I answered. And, still driven by the faint unease that the unexpected encounter had bred in me, I went on:

"I'm afraid you dropped a packet over that conservatory. They've asked Coningsby to let them take it down. Spoils the light for Mackinder's work, you know."

There was a little silence. Then Cheam flung out a hand to support Moreton, who had gone green-white and was wavering on his feet.

"Poor old boy!" Cheam spoke like a mothering woman. And to me, in explanation: "Malaria, you know. Gets him suddenly like this at times."

I was aghast. The man looked as if he were dying on his feet. I asked anxiously if I could drive them anywhere, but Moreton pulled himself together, and stammered that he would rather walk, and bustled Cheam away.

On the way down to Beech Hollow, Sybil said suddenly:

"I think Don's getting over his romance. He seems altogether more human, just lately. Almost as if he knew I was in the house, at times!"

I looked ahead of me at the light-splashed road, and said very gently:

"Don't be too hard on him. It may not be what you think. He chucked me a hint, the other day. He's having a bad time over it."

She turned her head sharply, to rake me with a quick glance. Then she laughed, not too happily.

"Oh, you men! How you hang together!" she said cynically. "I suppose, being a man, you sympathize with Don?"

"With both of you," I answered. "And I want your happiness more than most things in life, Sybil."

I think my tone must have told her what I had never told her before, for I sensed the little start she gave, and after that she sat very still and silent, until we turned in at the gate of Beech Hollow.

The garage gate and drive were on the far side of the house from the conservatory, but even as we turned in we could see the flare of lights and the movement of the small crowd that clustered round that end of the house.

Don came running as I took the car up to the garage.

"Bayliss! I'm glad to see you," he said, wringing my hand. Then he turned and put his arms around Sybil.

"Syb darling, I want you to go into the sitting room and stay there for a bit. I'll explain later."

"Don!" She held away from him a little, and the "light that never was, on land or sea," was in her eyes. I felt shut out of a magic world. "What's happening? What are all those people doing?"

"Sweet——" His voice was very low. "They're lifting a curse from you and me. I'll tell you later. But now—you'll go in, and keep the curtains drawn and stay quiet till I come?" He took her into the house and left her there. I'd stayed by the car, tinkering, with a bleak feeling that I didn't belong anywhere in this scene.

A moment later, Don came out of the house, and said:

"Come here, Bayliss. Quickly!" His voice was breathless with a sort of excitement and relief.

I went with him, an odd stir of emotion at my heart, and was just in time to see the slow, strained movements of the men who were lifting the tattered-looking thing that had lain in the shallow oblong which now showed in the rough rubble of the foundations, on which the cement of the conservatory had been laid.

An angular, limp, ragged thing it was, to have housed a human life and stirred the hearts of men to passion. But I knew, before Don told me, that it was all that was left of Nadia Moreton. And I remembered with a sick qualm the tall, uneasy-eyed creature who had touched my hand that afternoon in the park.

"He shot her. There's a bullet wound in the skull," said Don, in the queer, breathless note that had crept into his voice. "I think, you know, that I must have been right, Bayliss. The thing must have been so horrible here, in this lonely house among the trees. Think of him, hating her enough to kill her—that lovely woman. And then waiting till the men had gone, at night, to bury her, where he thought she would be safe. All this rough stuff——" He touched the rubble with his foot. "Of all the yokels who were working on it, who was to notice that it had been disturbed? But is it surprising that the business left a sort of photograph on the ether? A kind of visibility wave that only you and I were able to pick up?"

A burly policeman came and murmured in his ear, and the sinister little crowd dispersed, following the rough coffin out of the garden. Only two constables remained, keeping guard with flares over that scar in the ground.

"They've sent up to headquarters. I suppose Moreton's game is up," said Don, as we went back to the house.

He was right. Moreton's game had apparently been up ever since he got back to his flat, half an hour after he had been talking with Cheam and me in the park. They found him hanging on the landing outside his door.

Conningsby, enraged on behalf of the lovely woman whom he had half loved, said that he was glad Moreton had saved the country so much money.

I didn't feel quite that way about it. I kept a sneaking little sense of pity for the poor devil-ridden creature I had seen that day in the park.

There was no evidence to show why he had killed his wife. He seemed to have enough money, and hers died with her. So that wasn't it. And one couldn't help wondering what hidden hell that essentially gentle giant had gone through be-

fore he was driven to the pitch of murder.

I was sorry for Moreton, in spite of myself. I had a feeling that, if one had only known the truth, he would have been found to have paid for his crime before he committed it.

But I am glad for Sybil, even though her happiness shuts me out. She is like some one who has come back from the edge of the shadow of death. Don is doubly dear, because she thought she had lost him forever.

The only really disgruntled person is Coningsby. He is furious, because he cannot rent or sell Beech Hollow at any price.

Life Twisted

FIVE years ago, Edward Ellis, son of British parents who had for years been living in a Parisian suburb, went to stay with his grandmother in her bungalow at a French resort.

One day his grandmother, going to the locked desk where she kept her ready money, found that a large sum which she had put there a day or so before was gone.

The police were called in, and looking about for an inside-job thief, fixed on the seventeen-year-old boy. Ellis said he knew nothing about the money and kept on saying this. For some reason or other the grandmother thought he was not telling the truth. She told the boy that if he did not acknowledge the theft and tell where the money was, or what he had done with it, she would have the police arrest him, and he would bring shame and grief to his parents.

Obstinately, and like a hardened young wretch, as all thought, the boy still denied he knew anything about the matter; and that night, while the matter of his punishment was being held up, he slipped out of his room into the night and away.

The police failed to trace him.

Three weeks later the grandmother came across the money in another part of the house where she had evidently placed it for safety—though she had no recollection of so doing.

Overcome with remorse at the injustice of the accusation she had made against Ellis, she did all in her power to find the missing boy, but he had vanished as though through a hole in the ground.

It was quite obvious that in his resentment he had voluntarily severed himself from his family.

Detective agencies were employed, but without tracing Ellis.

His mother carried a sore heart for years, but recently watching a news reel depicting some of the Foreign Legion setting out on a desert expedition, she was almost certain that in one of the number she recognized her son.

She hastened home and had her lawyer get in touch with the authorities, in an effort to secure the discharge of the boy.

A friend of the family offered to go and bear the family olive branch in person to the legionnaire. He did, but here is the sting of the tragedy. When he did catch up with the expedition, it had just had a skirmish, and among the dead was the lad he was to induce to come home.

And somewhere up by Saturn, those two fated ships met.

APRIL 5, 2137 A. D. *The day.*

The preparations were complete. They had cradled the great ship on the main field of New World Terminal; they had sealed her ports and entrance locks—all save one; they had buffed her smooth, round hull till it was silver, eye-dazzling in the sunlight; and they had painted on her stern the huge red cross that would identify her for the thousands of watching telescopes on the first stages of her endless journey through the uttermost deeps of space. A bit theatric, perhaps, the cross, that now shone bloodlike under the late morning Sun—but great stuff for the newscasters. They had seized on it avidly and called it the "Blood Cross," coupling the name with the other more sinister one which they had given to the ship itself. They called the ship the "Coffin Ship."

There she lay, a thing apart, silent in the midst of the many-throated murmur of the crowd. Grandstands, put up weeks before to accommodate the thousands of oh-lookers who were expected, took only a fraction of those who came. Tens of thousands swarmed over the field, covering it as with a varicolored carpet. Thousands more hov-

The COFFIN SHIP

by Anthony Gilmore

ered high above in private ships, and in crowded passenger liners, chartered for the occasion—all kept clear of the air lanes and in a semblance of order by the busily darting, bullet-shaped craft of the police. They stared and talked endlessly, the hundreds of thousands; but there was no laughter, and the voices were not those of a crowd on a carefree holiday. An observer among them might sometimes have heard sounds like sobs—cries brought forth by memories.

For the sight of the silvery ship struck deep, bringing vividly to mind all the connotations of the journey ahead of her; and to hundreds of the watchers the red cross on her stern was a symbol, even as the newscasters had it: a symbol made poignant by the missing husband or wife or child whose body now was crumbling to dust in some far, forgotten league of lifeless space, or perhaps bleaching, under strange suns, on the hot barren soil of an asteroid unused by man. From these would come the sob, the sudden cry——

At high noon exactly they brought Falardo out to his fate—Falardo, the black-browed and eaglelike, tall and strong and wiry, and cool—cool as the ice caps of Mars.

The newscasters had been telling his story with renewed vigor and vividness since early morning, and wherever throughout the universe the children of Earth roamed, or wherever there were citizens of the United Commonwealths of Mars and the Imperial Empire of Venus, receivers were tuned to the story, and telescreens to the pictures which accompanied it.

It made a dark, headlong narrative, splashed with crimson, breathing the coldness of space itself and dipped in the colors of all the planets. Of his life, the newscaster of I-X-5 said:

"It was nine years ago when Falardo first burned his marauding way through space. The patrol ships, on finding his first victim, a ravaged derelict that shortly before had been the heavily laden merchant ship *Estra*, of Great-London, reported that here was a new pirate who struck with a cold ferocity never before known. It was news that brought dismay to civilization, for it had been thought that the men and ships of our Patrol Service had at last succeeded in their long battle to exterminate the bands of space pirates who had been infesting the interplanetary traffic lanes. Falardo struck soon again and again, and his apparent immunity encouraged others, so that strong convoys once more were the order of the day.

"His name, of course, was not known then. Only later, from the very few chance survivors, did we learn it. And his appearance: a tall man, wide-shouldered and thin-hipped, black of hair, and brows, and eyes, face deeply lined, alert of bearing, in speech quick and terse. The force of his presence, they said, was tremendous. One compared him to an eagle of sable plumage—with claws as cruelly sharp, and swoop as reckless, and heart as pitiless.

"This man, the 'Black Eagle,' spread terror through space for nine long years.

"Ships put out from port never to return. Their passengers, crews, vanished from life. Our patrol ships laid many traps for him, but always the trap was found empty, the bait sneered at. In his lightning-heeled ship, he would overtake, ray, seize, rend, kill, stuff his holds with loot. So he left a path of flame and desolation across the years—Falardo, the Black Eagle, the destroyer, the never-caught."

On the countless telescreens appeared an image of the man, taken after his capture—the dark face impassive, the lips tight, the eyes deep and aloof. A moment, then the image dissolved, and there followed another, of a woman; and all who looked at it were silent before her sheer speaking beauty.

"Tuaris, princess of the royal house of Venus—she whose amazing romance with Falardo led her own parents to disown her, to put a price on her head, and to call her outlaw.

"We know the details only by vague reports and rumors that have come through. It is known that her ship, carrying her back to her home from a visit to Earth, was seized by Falardo. Thus, in the heat of conflict, they met. The others in that ship—save one servant—died. The Princess Tuaris lived, lived and went with Falardo. And not by force. So swore this servant upon his return to Venus. The Princess Tuaris left her royal heritage and went with Falardo—because she loved him——

"That was two years ago. It is believed she is alive; but no one except Falardo knows where. She was not with him when he was taken. It may be that she has gone to some far place to grieve in solitude over her lost love, now gone from her forever——"

The picture of Tuaris faded. There took shape the figure of another man—one whom all Earth, Mars, Venus now knew—a young man, of medium height, with muscular body and broad shoulders; blue-eyed; tanned of face beneath his short-clipped flaxen hair. There

was about him the feeling that he was indomitable, that he was a fighter who could use his fists to do more than hold a ray-gun—a feeling of the steady, and resolute, and tireless. He wore with authority the uniform of the men whose lonely track lay always through space: the tight gray uniform, black boots, belt, and hip holster of Earth's Patrol Service; and on his shoulders were the silver comet buttons of a captain.

"Captain Stephen Davenant," the newscaster said, "of the Service. Commander of the patrol ship *Hotspur*, and capturer of Falardo. Master navigator, master fighter, and the one who alone could fling a net over the Black Eagle."

The listeners could feel the smile on the newscaster's lips as he continued:

"A true son of the Service, Davenant. Modest—too modest to accept his invitation to occupy the place of honor to-day on the field of New World Terminal. Captain Davenant remains, as usual, on service. We on Earth will have to wait for his next regular leave to see him in person. He's up there in space, millions of miles away, on routine duty in Base Number 4, off Saturn.

"He will, however, share our feelings. Four weeks from now a silver ship will be winging past Base Number 4. Captain Davenant will look at this ship through his Base's search beam, and he'll see—Falardo."

The newscaster's voice rose.

"We salute you, Captain Davenant, and all your men of the *Hotspur!* We on Earth, on Mars, and Venus, and in the thousand merchant ships now plying the space lanes of commerce made safe by you—we give you thanks! And luck and quick success in the capture of Haklut, the last remaining of the pirate chiefs, if he ever again dares appear in your reach!"

The blue-eyed man dissolved from the telescreens. The great hull of a space ship flickered into view. A silvery ship, lying silent amid a vast concourse of people, with a cross of flaming red marked on its stern. A coffin ship. The coffin of one who had been damned——

II.

HIGH NOON. A waiting hush, it seemed, over the whole world, and the thousands on the field of New World Terminal dead silent. One entrance port open in the silvery ship, the rest sealed and blank. A black-browed man standing near this one open port, under heavy guard, his dark face impassive, on the tight curve of his lips an almost imperceptible smile. He was listening.

A small platform had been built close to the open entrance port. On it sat a score of dignitaries, not only of Earth, but officials come specially for this day from Mars and Venus. One man, white-haired, but upright, stood on the front of the platform. He was the Head Criminologist of Earth's Crime Prevention Bureau. He spoke, slowly, impressively.

"—And so, Falardo, this punishment for your unspeakable crimes. The manner of it is not extreme, nor uselessly dramatic. Of all your cruelties, one stands out as the most heartless. Centuries ago, in an age which we have thought of as dark and primitive, lawless men preyed on the ships which crossed Earth's seven seas. They plundered, burned, killed their victims. In their degeneracy, they sometimes sent their victims to death across a plank, stretched from the side of their ship over the sea below, while those whose turn was to come watched in

horror and helplessness. But this death was quick and merciful compared to that to which often you doomed your captives. For you did not give them quick release. You would lock them, bound in chains, in the cabin of their captured ship; you would seal them there; you would set the ship's controls and send it out, out, through and ultimately past our solar system. And the slow death of those poor victims inside does not bear thinking of.

"Thus your present fate, Falardo, to which our Triplanetary Tribunal, on full consideration, has sentenced you. From it you cannot escape. All has been made sure. Nothing can aid you now. Death is irrevocable. It may be months away; but day in, day out, through the endless, inevitable hours, you will see it coming closer—until at last your food will be gone, and our solar system an infinity behind you; and you will perish, and your body will crumble, and you will be only a little dust in a ship that speeds on terribly into the last, the great Unknown.

"Go, Falardo! And may the solar system never see one like you again!"

A great sigh arose from the crowd, to die again into silence. On the dark face the faint smile still rested. Some thought the man inclined his head in a mocking gesture to the speaker; some thought his eyes rose up, past the horizon, into space. But the guards gripped him, and he disappeared inside the waiting ship.

In the exact center of the ship, a blind, steel-walled cabin had been prepared for him. Massive chains, ending in cuffs, were welded to the deck there. Near by was a tank, from which trailed a thin hose, nozzle-tipped. There was nothing else. No windows, no doors—just a tiny vent for the ship's automatically replenished air, and a slit for entrance. The guards, under close supervision, laid the man on the deck. They locked the heavy cuffs around his ankles and wrists, and clamped one thick band of metal over his waist. He could only move his shoulders and head enough to grip with his mouth the nozzle of the hose, and so draw from the tank the compressed liquid food it contained. The guards made certain he could do this. Then they left him.

They welded a plate into the slit in the wall. Two master navigators from the Patrol Service went up to the control room and adjusted the space-stick and the acceleration lever to the exact positions that, weeks before, had been calculated for them, and connected the wires which gave, to another navigator sitting at a switchboard in the main Terminal building, remote control over the ship. After this, every one went out, and waiting mechanics began to seal the entrance port.

Soon it was done. The coffin ship with its cargo lay ready.

In a breathless hush, the white-haired man on the platform raised one hand, held it so for a second, then dropped it. In the Terminal building, the master navigator pressed a button. The coffin ship stirred.

She lifted easily out of the cradle—raised higher—higher and higher, faster and faster. She sparkled in the sunlight, and in her belly the energy-converters, fed automatically, deepened their hum. Quickly she was at a thousand feet; then two; four; she dwindled so rapidly that in a minute she was but a drop of silver, on it a speck of red that flamed in the clear air like blood.

She was gone from Earth. Her last journey had begun.

For the rest of that day, the air

held nothing but talk about the coffin ship and the man who lay manacled in darkness inside its hull. The subject held everybody with its grisly interest. People could not hear enough of it. The newscasts went on.

"Some have expressed the opinion," one 'caster related, "that the Tribunal erred in decreeing this to be the mode of Falardo's death. They say space is vast, and full of lurking places; and surely it would be easy for a ship manned by Falardo's friends to swing alongside the craft containing him, cut through its hull, and release its prisoner. Others have gone so far in their belief in the Black Eagle's mysterious powers as to be sure he will be able to release himself, take control of the ship and disappear in it to one of his old unknown haunts. But a minute's reflection will demonstrate the absurdities of both these ideas. Falardo, after all, has no supernatural powers—and his gang has been wiped out. He has not a known friend in the universe. The only space pirates left are those led by the Vennsian, Haklut—Falardo's bitterest enemies—of whom, incidentally, nothing has been heard for several months. The patrol ships are now concentrated on achieving their apprehension.

"Even if there were a ship bent on releasing him, it would be impossible. The coffin ship will be watched closely as far as the orbit of Saturn, and beyond. Patrol ships are stationed along the course all the way to the orbit of Jupiter. Four Service Bases have also been held at points close to it. We on Earth will have close-up reports from these vessels and Bases at intervals of not more than four days. In short, the coffin ship and the man it carries will be under constant scrutiny until well-nigh out of the solar system. Any strange ship anywhere near the appointed course would be reported immediately, starting a patrol ship speeding at once toward it to ask its business.

"And as for Falardo's releasing himself—the specially forged chains binding him will loosen their tight grip only when the flesh they hold crumbles into nothingness.

"No—the age of miracles is past. The Tribunal has left nothing to chance. Falardo lies in his tomb, and will never leave it."

Other 'casters painted the picture more dramatically. One, by his quick words, heightened by pauses, let the fascinated listeners almost peer into the silver streak that arrowed on its unswerving course.

"His face? That dark, cruel face? Veiled when they took him into the ship, inscrutable even when they locked the heavy clamps around his body. But now? *Now?*—with the green planet dwindling behind him, with all the warmth of human friendship and love that might once have been his lost forever, with no human voice within thousands of miles and more, with nothing but the memory of the bleeding bodies and white faces and last despairing curses of his victims to keep him company—the still darkness around him peopled with ghosts—now what shows on Falardo's face? Impassive still? Defiant? Perhaps. But in a week? In a month? Then what? Then, Falardo, the defiance and scornful impassivity will vanish from your face, and your lips will twist, and your cheeks and forehead set in deep lines of agony, and you will scream out into the silence, and you will wrestle against the chains, and the sweat will cover you, and the foam fleck your mouth. Yes—then, Falardo, *you* will know how so

many of your victims died, and that moment will find you craven!

"And when the food is gone, and your speeding coffin lifts in a lifeless space a million miles from man's farthest outpost—then what? Then, Falardo, the last madness will come upon you, and you will pay; you will pay in full.

"Where now the crew who roistered and killed and laughed at Earth's laws under your command? Where now that princess who left her royal house to go beside you on your path of blood? Where now the treasure you amassed through all your years of plunder? Where are these things now, Falardo?"

The men who had followed him had been strung up on the old style of captured brigands on steel gibbets—this the listeners knew. But the rumored treasure? And Tuaris, dark and lovely princess of the royal house of Venus? Where? Never to be found? The secret of their whereabouts to die with the body that lay chained in the outspeeding coffin ship? Were these things fated to become at last only a legend, grim and caked with blood, but given beauty too by the dim, mysterious figure of a woman?

On Earth, on Venus, and on Mars, the millions wondered.

III.

STEPHEN DAVENANT, patrol captain, threw down his cards, rose from the chair, and with a frown of irritation walked to the switch controlling the 'speaker. The hyperbolic phrases of some far-distant newscaster who obviously took pride in his tongue had been snapping from it for the past quarter hour, embroidering with all the sensationalism possible the same old subject. And Davenant was weary of it.

"Yap on," he growled into the 'speaker, "but to some one else." With a click he threw the switch over, and the offending voice ceased.

The other officers who played or lounged about the tiny cabin grinned at one another; and Lieutenant Hartisborne, Davenant's second in command, cocked an eye up at his superior and chuckled:

"Why, Steve—you're not weakening? You'll live to hear fifty years of that!"

"If I thought so, I'd jump off now. Four weeks of it!"

A navigator not in the game drawled past his pipestem:

"Well, Davenant, you're to blame."

"I?"

"You got the fellow, didn't you?" He continued through the general laugh: "I'm sorry for the poor 'casters. They were expecting you to be present down on Earth and tell just how you did it—and when you turned down the invitation, they had to do it themselves in the way they knew you'd have done it if you were there!"

Davenant joined in the smiles. The player across from him spoke up with mock awe:

"When you had Falardo in front of you, did you feel his awful magnetic personality? You know—the power of him—what they call his sinister mystery?"

Davenant did not smile. He leaned back, twisted around, and stared out through one of the curved ports; was silent for a minute. "I felt something," he said. "I felt—quite a few things——"

Beyond the port lay the vastness, the lifeless silence of the far stretch of space which engulfed this, man's farthest outpost. There lay the void, the infinite, the everlasting. Strewn through it like a flood of pearls flung from a lavish hand were the icy

flame points of the stars, the exiles of the beyond. Somewhere out there was one other point—distant Mother Earth; and a larger nugget of yellow light—the Sun. Saturn in all her matchless beauty was the closest to Service Base Number 4.

She was their sun.

Her central core no larger than the Moon as seen by those on Earth, the planet poised above against the void, imprisoned by the lustrous, misty beauty of her rings. So close she seemed that she might have been a ball to be picked at will out of space; but a week at highest acceleration in the fastest ship would not reach her. The glow of her weirdly beautiful luminescence washed over the Base, filtered through the darkened, triple quartzite ports.

A sphere within a sphere—so were these Bases of the Patrol Service built. In their four decks were contained stores and complete living facilities for a score of men; ray-throwers slitted the rounded sides; the great generators of her power lay below. A faint and constant hum assured every one at all times that their mechanisms were preserving the Base's proper distance from Saturn.

But the real purpose of the Base was indicated by the patrol ship which rested inside it, in a complete though narrow-fitting hangar. The ship there was Davenant's, the *Hotspur*. She was resting now inside her mother sphere for a week, at the end of which time she would again be launched out to begin her regular two-month patrol, the farthest circle of which verged on the circle made by the patrol ship of the Base next closest to Earth. So the Service kept its wide-sweeping vigil.

Ordinarily, at this date, Davenant would be far away on his rounds; but his routine had been altered because of the lone ship winging its way up from Earth. He was not displeased—though it had been boring to have had to listen to the eternal jabbering of the newscasters of Earth, Mars, and Venus.

The smoke curled up now from his cigarette; his eyes were on distant things, his mind remembering distant feelings.

"Yes," he resumed at last, "I felt quite a few things. I thought of that woman—a princess—and I had a strange——"

He was interrupted. From a grille in the wall spoke a voice of level command.

"Captain Davenant?"

In three steps Davenant was beside the grille, replying.

"Yes, commander?"

"Will you please come up to the tower immediately?"

"Right away, sir."

Rapidly he left the cabin, climbed a short flight of metal steps, passed through the "office," in which the orderly on duty sat behind the large switchboard, under a green-shaded light, climbed again, and came to the top level of the sphere. He knocked on a narrow door, and went in. A tall, spare man, hair graying but dark eyes as keen as they had been when, thirty years before, he had entered the Service, nodded a perfunctory answer to his salute—Commander Hugh Brandon.

It was a small place—the ceiling curved, the walls slashed by oval plates of darkened quartzite, the control knobs and dials of its mass of gleaming machinery standing out under sharp beams of light. It was the eyes of the sphere, the brain. From here flashed the currents which activated the whole.

There was a smile in Brandon's eyes as he indicated the eyepiece of a slim, tubular instrument near by.

"It's here," he said. "Falardo's in range. I got him just a minute ago."

"You haven't used the search beam on it yet, sir?"

"No, just the 'scope; the search beam's your honor, Davenant—to you goes first look at him. That's why I called you up."

During the past four weeks, time-place had come through of the silver ship's progress from ships cruising close to the route—liners, freighters, and patrol craft; and once, a week ago, Base Number 3 had given fuller details. Through their search beam—the bulky and highly complicated visual mechanism possessed, in space, only by the Bases—the commander of Number 3 had seen, from nearly five hundred thousand miles away, directly into the coffin ship; had seen chained to the deck the strong, spread-eagled form of the prisoner, all unconscious of the ghostly eye surveying him; and had reported the dark face still impassive, the deeply lined cheeks and brow still emotionless and calm. "All normal," this commander had concluded his report. "No alien ships sighted along the route. Our calculations indicate that Falardo's ship should be in range of Base Number 4 in approximately six Earth days."

"Go ahead, captain," Commander Brandon smiled. "—the 'scope is focused. The same positional readings will focus the search beam."

Davenant stepped to the eyepiece and set the indicators.

The search beam was a recent invention, and still gave him an uncanny feeling to use its amazing powers. They were more than human, seemed supernatural. Its sensitive electric eye focused by a magnetic principle the exact center of gravity of any given metallic body within the cone of its directional beam, and gave to the watcher a magnified view of any part of the interior of that body. It was commonplace on Earth, at small distances; but miraculous when operating clearly up to a range of five hundred thousand miles.

Davenant stood motionless, peering. The reflector was misty. He made adjustments, and objects began to form, blurred, vague. Other adjustments. Then the silence of the tower was broken by a gasp of amazement.

"Got him, captain?"

Stephen Davenant's body straightened. He wheeled from the instrument, his face taut.

"Take a look, sir," he said. "Maybe I'm crazy."

Brandon sprang to the eyepiece, looked and turned.

"He's gone! He's not in the ship! The chains have been broken!"

IV.

THE SEARCH BEAM showed it clearly. It sped them over the hundreds of thousands of miles; it delineated sharply the interior of that metal cabin; it showed on the deck the massive chains lying broken and empty, the great links cleanly cut through. It showed a gash in the wall of the cabin. It showed the silvery coffin ship empty—while still it arrowed ahead on its course. From bow to stern, top to bottom, empty. Falardo, the Black Eagle, was flown from his cage.

But how? When? By what power?

"It's—impossible!" Brandon burst out fiercely. "That ship's been watched all the way! Not at close hand, these last few days—but watched! Every minute! No other ship's been near it—not within hundreds of thousands of miles!"

"The instrument can't lie," Stephen Davenant said.

His voice was cold, matter of fact; his bronzed face was set in hard lines. He went on:

"At some point along his course, Falardo left the ship. That's fact; he's loose again; we must face it. Some point along his course, say three days ago. At that time, he was at his farthest from any watcher with a beam. He didn't get out by himself, of course. Some one released him."

"But no other ship's been seen anywhere near! No ship whose identity we don't know has even been reported in space!"

"There's one thing to do," Davenant sugested. "Go back along the line of his course with the search beam. If anything's there or near, we'll pick up a sign of it."

He acted himself. His fingers returned to the beam's controls, felt with them delicately. He said, almost as an afterthought, while looking:

"Commander—we better have the *Hotspur* made ready. There's more than a chance we'll need her."

His cool, level voice brought Brandon back to normal. He nodded; went and punched several colored buttons on the central control board and snapped a series of commands into the speaking grille. A stir rose from below, and suddenly throbbed through the Base. Men in gray uniforms hurried into the patrol ship hangar; stores were carried into the *Hotspur's* holds; mechanics bent to her enormous power plant. Things moved.

But in the top level of the sphere, there was silence. "I'll watch that silver ship through the 'scope," Brandon had muttered; and now the two men, almost side by side, stared into their different eye-pieces.

The search beam's eye tracked back through space, feeling for trace of a metallic body. If there was one within the instrument's range, its eye, drawn by magnetism, would find it. But the range was limited; beyond, it was blind.

Davenant spiraled the potential field, steadily increasing his power as he lengthened his instrument's reach, scanning every league to the sides of the coffin ship's route. He neared the limit. His lips were tight set, his whole body locked with nervous tension. And, by his side, in silence, Brandon watched the empty coffin ship's onrushing flight.

Minutes passed.

The two voices pierced the hush almost at the same time. Davenant's first:

"I've got something!" he said. "Something's there! Very faint, but I'm sure——"

And then his commander's:

"By God, she's exploded! The coffin ship's blown up!"

Davenant was not altogether surprised. Even while concentrating on his search beam's controls, striving to bring into cleared view what he had discovered, he murmured:

"Whoever released Falardo left a charge on the ship. They knew telescopes would be watching it; they hoped it would be out of range of our search beams. They knew it would be assumed by the watchers that something had gone wrong—that Falardo was dead, killed in the ship. Clever, all right, but——"

His voice ceased abruptly. Brandon stared at him hopefully.

"You've got something?"

"Yes! Sure of it, now. It's too far away to see anything clearly, but something registers. A ship's there. Can't be an asteroid."

"But—if that's so, why hasn't it been reported? No ship's been

sighted in that vicinity, Davenant!"

"We'll find out why it hasn't been reported. Focus the 'scope on its position, sir."

"A minute." Brandon bent to the eye of his instrument, adjusted it—then said harshly:

"Nothing! Black as night! No ship's there!"

Davenant contradicted him. "A ship is there. And I'm beginning to think——"

But a cry from the other cut off his words.

"By God, you're right! That proves it!"

"See it?"

"Not the ship—no! But it occulted a star—something blotted it out!"

Stephen Davenant nodded grimly. "That's why the ship hasn't been reported," he said. "She's invisible to a telescope; she won't reflect light. Her hull is painted black."

He turned from the instrument, took up the pencil and pad lying there, calculated for a minute, and underlined the result. "That seems to be her position—— And now," he concluded, "I'll step in on her with the *Hotspur* and ask her why. Right, sir?"

"Right!" said Brandon.

The Service functions smoothly. Its men, trained to the exigencies of space, hear commands and obey without question. In the lower levels of Base Number 4, they heard that Palardo had escaped, that the coffin ship had been shattered shortly afterward, and accepted the fact without pausing in their work of preparing the *Hotspur* for flight. The mechanics clambered out, the nine gray-clad men of her crew went up in through the aft port lock; Captain Stephen Davenant finished his few last words with Commander Brandon, saluted and followed his men. The hangar locks were closed; its air was exhausted; its massive entrance port slid smoothly open; and Davenant and his second in command, Hartisborne, at her controls, the hundred and fifty-foot length of the *Hotspur* woke to life under the whine of her converters, and nosed her sleek body into space. The hangar port closed behind her. In the sphere's tower the commander stood to the salute. The *Hotspur* slid away, picked up speed, shot off like a comet; the sphere became a toy globe behind her, and was gone.

That was quick action. What followed was slow.

On Earth, Mars and Venus, sensation filled the air. The news webbed every land. In space liners, it was kept from the passengers, but the officers looked to their ray guns.

The Black Eagle gone! The coffin ship exploded! Somewhere up by Saturn! A rumor to the effect that the Patrol Service had a clue to the whereabouts of the pirate's rescuers and that a patrol ship was speeding there! The authorities would say no more. A speedy recapture was hoped for.

But that did not alter the prevailing feeling. They'll never get him now, men said to one another. And if he was merciless before, what now, when again he strikes! It's started all over. Space is no longer safe——

But six days after the *Hotspur* had left, a climaxing message came from her across the void to Base Number 4. And Commander Hugh Brandon, alone in the tower, clenched his hands and smiled for the first time in all that interval as he heard the level words:

"We have her clearly in sight and are rapidly overhauling her. About to try to establish contact. Will keep you informed. Davenant, captain."

V.

IT HAD been hard, and a lot of it guesswork, as to the black ship's course. For unless he could divine the course and so cut across to intercept it, Davenant had no chance to overtake his quarry. The *Hotspur* was fast, but the other had too much of a lead.

The Base had helped him. With search beam and their own far more powerful telescope, Brandon and his men had followed as best they could the elusive track, with nothing but faint signals in the beam and occulted stars in the 'scope to go by, radioing what knowledge they gained to Davenant. And he, at the chart table, the navigator at his side, had toiled through weary hours, striving to piece together the clues and determine definitely the black craft's course.

And now at last he knew that luck had hovered over him, discarding for him wrong guesses, picking the right ones. The *Hotspur* was on the very heels of her quarry.

He stood in the control room, Hartisborne next to him at the telescope, the navigator at the space stick, the radio operator waiting eagerly a few feet away behind the gleaming array of his dials. The second in command spoke.

"About three thousand miles, I think. Rakish-looking thing—bigger than we. Maybe a little less than three thousand."

"Right," Davenant said. "Call her, Hanley. Who she is—her business—where she's bound."

The operator knifed in a lever. He said into the mike:

"Patrol ship *Hotspur* calling. Black ship—who are you? What port of registry? Where are you bound, and on what business? Davenant, captain."

"Switch their reply into the room."

"Yes, sir."

The four men stared at the 'speaker. Minutes dragged by. The silence was left unbroken.

"No answer, sir."

"Repeat."

Again the call droned out, and again brought no reply. Davenant's eyes narrowed.

"Still think they can get away from us, eh? All right. Tell 'em unless they answer, we'll close in and open fire."

"Yes, sir—— Black ship," said the operator, "—unless reply is given immediately to our questions, we close in on you and open fire. Davenant, captain."

"Wonder what armament they carry," Hartisborne whispered, his eyes sparkling; and his superior said:

"They know damned well the patrol ships carry the heaviest rays. If they don't, they'll find out."

"Then we'll hear something——"

A sputter from the 'speaker confirmed his words. A gruff, irritable voice spoke from it.

"Patrol ship *Hotspur*—we are the R. V. S. S. *Sentrallis*, proceeding on special business of the royal house of Venus. Your interference is unwarranted, and will have serious consequences unless it ceases promptly. Sheer off. Galaire, captain."

"Bunk!" Davenant grunted. He stepped to the mike. "I'll talk," he said, and the operator cut him in.

"Davenant, captain, speaking. *Sentrallis*—you are under arrest for violation of Law 3, Article B of the Interplanetary Code, which declares it illegal for the hull of a space ship to be covered with any non-light-reflecting substance. Maintain your speed, hold your present course, and send to us an officer with your cre-

dentials, registry bill, list of cargo, and all persons aboard. I will come alongside. At the first sign of resistance, I open fire. *Hotspur.*"

He waited for reply, but there was none. "Is that understood? Do you agree?" he snapped.

After a minute, the gruff voice filled the speaker again.

"*Hotspur*—your demands will be met. We warn you, however, that you will incur by your action severe protests from the ministers of His Royal Venusian Majesty. These protests from a neighboring friendly power will not be ignored by your superiors. Galaire, captain."

The men in the control room looked questioningly at their commander. He grinned. "Stalling for time," he said. "They're no Venusian ship. Venus knows the law against black as well as Earth. They've something up their sleeve." His eyes went to Hartisborne. "Defensive web on," he said curtly. Then into a speaking tube:

"Build full power for offensive rays. Stand by for action!"

Bringing a ship within a quarter mile of another ship in space calls for fine maneuvering and long painstaking work. Prepared for all eventualities, slowly the *Hotspur* was jockeyed close to the black craft. Both had been accelerating, but their speeds drew down gradually until nearly equal. The patrol ship made a colorful spectacle: over her gleaming hull a thin enveloping skin of spectral blue light was knit, flashing, glowing against the sable void—the electric web against enemy rays. And in the belly of her was a throaty drone, telling of the power that her dynamos were building for her offensive rays, in case they were needed. She was trimmed for battle; an alert hand was on her space stick, and keen eyes peered out.

Davenant stood at the telescope. He scanned every inch of the black ship. Even at this comparatively short distance, she was hardly perceptible in her coat of black, and would have been invisible altogether had it not been for, the faint starlight on her near side and the stars on the far side that she occulted. She appeared thin, rakish, at least fifty feet longer than the *Hotspur*. Two points of light winked from ports in her bow; that was all. She was a bare quarter mile away now, hours after she had been first spoken; and practically on a level with the Service ship. Close enough, Davenant decided. Still peering at her, he said:

"Cable ready."

"Cable ready, sir," Hartisborne replied.

"Release."

"Release, sir!"

A stud was pushed in. From a small trapdoor just above the *Hotspur's* midship entrance port, a thin ribbon of metal, magnet-tipped, shot out straight at the black ship. It clamped on to the other's hull, making a flexible but strong link between them.

"All right," Davenant said. "Tell 'em to send over their officers."

Hanley did so. Intently the men in the control room watched.

A circle of light appeared in the side of the dark ship. Inside, limned against the light, stood a figure clad in a bulky space suit, with massive metal plates and huge, shining helmet. Hesitantly, it moved. It stepped out into space, grasped with one hand the linking cable. The entrance port closed behind it. Weightless, guided by the cable, it came toward the *Hotspur*.

"Carrying any weapons?" Hartisborne asked.

"Can't see any."

Around the waist of the approaching figure was a belt, with a small box strapped to it—one of the type used to carry a ship's papers and credentials. Nothing else was apparent—no ray gun—Davenant made sure of that. Nevertheless, he guarded against trickery. He summoned to the control room the other six men of his crew, flipped from its holster his own gun, and bade the rest do likewise. He scanned the suited figure again.

He could not see the face inside the helmet. Who might it be? An officer of the royal Venusian fleet? No. Venus, even more than Earth, was desirous of Falardo's death, because of the disinherited Princess Tuaris—and in this black ship was the answer to the pirate's escape. Falardo himself, possibly, inside the suit, coming to make a last desperate play? Perhaps; but highly improbable. If Falardo was aboard that ship—and Davenant felt sure he was—they would try to keep him hidden—bluff their way through with false credentials. But who were these people, these daring adventurers who had risked everything to release the Black Eagle? Who in the whole universe wished his release?

The figure was near. "Midship entrance port open," Davenant ordered. "Grant and Dailish, go wait and bring him here. Have your guns ready; watch for a trick."

Three minutes later all heard the hiss of the entrance port's outer door closing. The newcomer was aboard the *Hotspur*. A moment; then they heard the inner door open. They stared down the passageway, to where the two patrol men waited. They saw step clumsily out of the port the gleaming metal shape.

It walked slowly, uncertainly, weighted down under the burden of the suit; was conducted to the control room, a patrol man on each side, gun in hand. Davenant peered into the helmet, still unopened.

Not a man, inside the space suit—but a woman!

A woman! And one of rare, magnetic beauty. Behind the helmet's quartzite plate was a face such as none of the staring men had ever seen before. For the moment, they forgot their guns. That oval, darkly rich face with the deep lash-shadowed eyes held them as if hypnotized. A strange beauty was hers, veiled and secret—a loveliness of far worlds, suggesting strange, sad music, sobbing liquid notes heard as the dusk comes down—a beauty of the unknown, of a realm closed to man—— They stared.

But in Stephen Davenant's mind was the thought: *I know that face. I have seen it before. Somewhere—somewhere——*

The woman stepped forward. Her veiled eyes were on him. She took the box from the belt around her waist, handed it to him. Her full lips moved, forming silently the words "Our ship's papers, captain, that you asked for."

And he, leaving her eyes, took and opened the box.

Ship's papers? No! A gray mist, a vapor, a spreading, evil cloud, pungent, quick-winding around them, choking them, piercing into their brains—sending them down in darkness!

Cries, a curse—and then, struggling, they went to their knees, swayed, gasped, toppled full length, and lay still. And through the haze, just before the last flicker of consciousness sped from him, Stephen Davenant saw the woman smile as she stood in her sealed suit—and knew her—knew her as the Princess Tuaris.

VI.

A DREAM again, or was that a real voice?

He did not know or care. He seemed to be drifting through fleecy layers of clouds, soaring on and on, at rest, warm, comfortable, wanting never to be anywhere else, wanting only to stay in this phantasmal bed of clouds. Sleep, lie quiet, drift on forever——

The voice again. He was irritated at its intrusion. He tried not to hear it. But from far away it pierced through the warm clouds to him; he hated it, he wished it would go, but he had to hear it. A man's voice, low and resonant, with a peculiar but attractive quality to it—and somehow vaguely familiar.

What was it saying?

"—Yes, *marlitza*—we won't have to wait long. These fools can be tricked easily."

Then the voice of a woman, low too, a little husky, its tones soft and caressing.

"But there's Haklut! He seems stupid, but I think it is only a guise. Those little eyes see a lot. He only consented to help when I made him the promise. He will keep you to it, immediately. Be careful of him!"

"I have no fears, *marlitza*—we'll soon be away from them; and as for the promise—I'll twist him away from that. Then you and I, together, for all time—— But I must go. They'll become suspicious. They don't know I'm here."

"Yes—go."

"These men—when will they be conscious?"

"A day, I think. But go—we must take no chances."

"Yes, *marlitza*."

Silence again. Silence and the returning haze, the swirling clouds, the warmth, the wonderful sense of rest and peace—— But Haklut? Hadn't he once known some one called Haklut?——

It didn't matter—— Sleep, warmth, quiet—that was all he wanted, that was enough——

"You're awake, Captain Davenant?"

Light broke through his opening eyelids. He sighed, then suddenly looked up, startled. He saw her standing beside him.

He was in a ship's cabin, lying on a cot. The place was familiar. A shelf, a picture on the wall—yes, it was his own cabin, in the *Hotspur!*

Davenant sat up. He gazed at the woman.

"Princess Tuaris," he said.

She smiled, a slow softening of the full lips. "Yes, I am she. How do you feel, Captain Davenant?"

She was alone in the cabin with him. She was clothed in a single garment of white stuff, loose and flowing and metallically shining, setting off strikingly the dark wealth of hair above and the deep liquid brown of her eyes. Her eyes were on him, and he met them; he did not want to look elsewhere.

"You tricked us neatly," he said. "I recognized you and the identity of the gas as I fell—— All that they have said about you is true, Princess. You have courage. I admire it; but I'm sorry it is set to such a purpose."

He was thinking that he had heard her voice before. Things were piecing together. He'd had a dream—he remembered now. Or was it a dream? A man and a woman, talking—something about a promise—and a name mentioned—— Haklut! —that was the name! Haklut, the brigand chief!

"Where are my men?" he asked. "And the black ship?"

"Your men are in another cabin,

"Let go!"—and a shower of rocks crashed down.

captain. As for the black ship, we are following it."

"Where to?"

"That you will find out soon for yourself."

"I see. And Falardo? Where is he?"

"Falardo is aboard this ship."

The dream came clear then. The two voices in it had been those of Falardo and Princess Tuaris. She had made a promise to Haklut to enlist his aid in the rescuing of the Black Eagle. A promise of what? Something immensely valuable, that was certain; for the two pirates had been bitter enemies, and not for nothing would one help the other. And of course Falardo did not intend to keep that promise——

"The black ship is not Falardo's, then?" he asked.

"No, captain. It is the *Sronda* —it belongs to one your Service knows of—Haklut."

"Yes," he said. "We know him."

"He is aboard her now, ahead. This ship is now under command of his lieutenant, Baichel." She smiled again. "And now you know it all.

I went to Haklut, you see, and persuaded him to try to release Falardo. We succeeded. And we are bound toward the world Haklut calls his own. You will know soon where it is. But your knowledge of it, captain, will not help your Service."

He answered her smile, though it left her lips as she uttered the last words. "I understand," he said quietly. "I'm now in the position your Falardo was in just a little while ago. But I'm more unfortunate, I'm afraid."

"How, captain? Chained in a ship, left to die slowly, all alone in the silence?"

"I have no Princess Tuaris to come for me."

Their eyes held together. Her beauty threw a spell over him; her face was one for which a man would throw a world away. Beauty for the gods was hers, and courage—and devotion—— Yet the man to whom she had given her heart and her life was one whose name reeked with blood, whose cruelty was unspeakable!

She turned from his steady eyes. "You must come with me now, captain. Baichel would see you."

He followed her.

It was difficult to recognize the control room of the *Hotspur*. Gone was the atmosphere of the Service, the quietness, the orderliness, the feeling of calm readiness for any emergency. The men there affected Davenant painfully; they were grotesque in these quarters.

There were six of them. Five needed no second glance to place their type. Hard-faced, unshaven, their eyes shallow and restless with dull animal cunning, clothed, all, in a shabby assortment of garments, small arsenals of weapons strapped around their waists. The sixth was Baichel.

He was short and thin, half bald, his gray face clean-shaved—the small one in a place of power—the schemer, and also the coward. The thin strands of his hair were greased down. The line of his chin sloped inward. When the two entered, he rose, and went at once to meet them.

He grinned. "Our friend Captain Davenant, the captain of the ship! Let me introduce myself——"

"I know you," Davenant said.

The other expressed mock surprise. "These Service men know everything! But wasn't it a little rash of you to try and arrest the royal Venusian ship *Sentrallis* for breaking that Interplanetary law?"

"No," Davenant said curtly. "Not rash."

They were all staring at him, grinning. The woman stood apart. Baichel shrugged.

"But see where it got you?"

"I shan't be here very long, I think."

"No, captain? How did you get that idea?"

"This is not the only patrol ship in space. It came from a Base, and the Base has been watching. It will have reported what it has seen, and other patrol ships will be coming."

One of the men guffawed. Baichel said:

"How comforting to think that! But, unfortunately, you were unconscious longer than you realize, and we are now well out of your Base's telescopic range. And then, the first thing we did when we came on board this ship was to select a man who had a voice similar to your operator's and have him send a message to your Base, telling them that you had the black ship in your command and were making it lead you to the place it came from. The Base suspected nothing—— But enough of this. My master, Haklut,

is not on board, but there is some one else here who will find the sight of you interesting." He turned to the woman. "Don't you think so? Let's bring Falardo here."

She nodded. They sent for him.

As he came in, the tall, black-browed man said slowly:

"So—Captain Davenant again. You were not so clever this time as before."

The other men had dwindled into insignificance when he entered the control room. The very atmosphere seemed to change, from the mere fact of his presence. There was strength there now, and something deep and strangely magnetic—and dangerous. The lithe, wiry form, the lean, dark face with its deeply graved lines, the black eyes with their weirdly burning glint of light, were part of these things. The man was unfathomable. As much as the woman, he stood apart. For these two there was no master. And yet they were different. Strange currents, evil, conscienceless, warped, twisted, flowed through the man. The woman was clear.

And Stephen Davenant knew again the feelings he had known when the pirate had stood before him as his captive. He felt for a moment his own strength leave him. The black eyes drew it out; the black eyes commanded.

With an effort he brought himself out of it. He said:

"Perhaps not, Falardo. Your princess planned too well."

Falardo's eyes went to the woman, and he smiled.

"May I ask what you have in mind for me?"

"That must wait till we see Haklut. These men are his, and the other ship. But I advise you to have no false hopes, captain. There is a unique prison on Haklut's world—and a very secure one, you can believe me."

Davenant's eyes narrowed, and Falardo saw it. He turned to Baichel.

"I think you'd better take Captain Davenant back to his cabin. He may forget that his days of action are over."

Baichel gestured to two of his men, and he was at once taken back and locked in his steel-walled cabin.

A unique prison, he thought, as he sat again on the cot. On Haklut's world. And Brandon, in the Base, suspecting nothing. He and his crew weaponless, and hopelessly outnumbered——

Yet, strangely, his spirits were high. Death, perhaps, in the end—but first a fight, and a fight that would be long remembered!

VII.

FOUR DAYS later Davenant sensed that the ship was poising, dropping down slowly. For all that time she had been decelerating. Now the hum of the energy-converters was no longer audible, for a new noise filled the hull of the *Hotspur*. Down the whole length of her there beat a steady drumming. That was rain—a hard-driving, steady downpour. Land must be close beneath. In a few minutes, a slight quiver ran through the ship; he felt her settle and lie still, and heard from the control room Baichel's shout:

"Make fast! All right? Ports open!"

Davenant got up, stretched. For four days he had been confined to the cabin, seeing no one besides the two men who brought his badly cooked meals. He felt cramped, conscious of a desire to bend his arms on something—anything, to move.

The lock on the cabin door clicked over, and one of Baichel's men entered, carrying a pair of steel cuffs. Without speaking, he clamped them on the Service man's wrists, then gestured to the door.

"Out," he said harshly. "Go ahead!"

In the passageway outside, Davenant saw a group of men, packed close together and bound as he was. The light was dim, and he could not at first see their faces; but the cuffs identified them. Hartisborne's voice cried out to him cheerfully:

"Hello, Steve! All right? Any after effects from that damned gas?"

Davenant stepped close to them. It was good to see the old friendly faces around him again, to see the grins of welcome. The second in command whispered:

"You know anything? We couldn't learn a thing."

"Yes—this is Haklut's place," he informed them hurriedly. "The black ship was his. Falardo's aboard, and the woman was Princess Tuaris. I believe——"

The heavily armed guards interrupted, shoving them on. They were herded down the passageway to the open entrance port. The drone of the rain increased as they neared it, and somewhere was the sound of moving water, as if, close by, waves were breaking on a rocky shore.

"Move on, damn you! Outside!" a guard shouted, and they went through the port. They gazed around eagerly, shivering as the sheets of rain hit them.

Haklut's world lay before their eyes.

A grim, gray scene it was—a world of water and close-shrouding clouds. Harsh, humid, forgotten by gentleness or beauty, it stretched away into sodden layers of clouds—not land, but sea. Water covered the surface of this world, dark-gray, jagged waves, topped by crests of dirty white, and pitted by the fierce lances of the rain. The only land visible besides that on which they stood was a sharp spur that rose abruptly from the sea several miles away.

The *Hotspur* had come down on an island similar to the one on the horizon, but apparently larger. It seemed to be formed all of rock, black, slaty stuff in great convoluted heaps, which rose, near the middle, to a massive pinnacle whose tip was lost in the swirling clouds a hundred feet above. Water streamed everywhere, rain and shreds of the waves that were forever rising and breaking into spray on the rocky rampart below. Heat, sticky air, the desolate scene, rain and the angry snarl of the sea, and a nauseous stench as of rotting fish that pervaded the whole—surrounded by these things, drenched through as they were, the men of the *Hotspur* felt what spirits they had left fall.

The ship rested on the one patch of the island that was level enough for a possible landing place. Before it, in the sheer wall of rock, loomed a great dark opening. There was no sign of any habitation, or anything that might have been built by man; until, vaguely, as their eyes adjusted themselves, they could make out, inside the cavern, the lines of a ship's hull. It was, they realized, the *Sronds*, Haklut's black marauder, snugly contained and perfectly concealed, except to a close-searching eye.

Davenant could see nothing of the others—Falardo and Tuaris, Baichel, or any of his men. The guards prodded them.

"Go on—out! Right ahead, into the cave!"

They stumbled down over the

ridges of rock, slipping on their smoothly wet surfaces, falling heavily at times against jagged upthrusts. They passed into the cavern entrance. The air here was musty, dank. The rain was left behind, but from the darkness above icy drops of water kept falling, stinging into their heated flesh. They shuffled on uncertainly, feeling for secure footing. The hull of the black ship was left behind. Soon all sound of the rain and sea was gone, and the atmosphere became that of a tomb. And still the guards shoved them on. The cavern seemed endless. By now, Davenant judged, they must be at the very heart of the island.

Then he saw a faint glow of light, and at the same moment voices came to his ear. The passage they were following turned suddenly—and they came into full sight of the brigand Haklut's deep-buried lair.

Falardo was there, talking. His resonant, full-bodied voice filled the place. His tones rose and fell quickly, and came back in ringing echoes.

"—But not now! Surely you see, friend Haklut, how foolish that would be! Space is dangerous for us at present; I think that we must let at least a month go by. The Base from which Davenant's ship came, the men there, know that I was not blown up with the ship. You can see what will happen. The commander of that Base will wait only so long to hear from Davenant again; when no word comes, the patrol ships will start out. They'll scour space. And, though your *Sronda* is black and hard to see, it might again be detected as it was this time. And then everything would be lost—— You can't suspect me! You think I have no gratitude? I have agreed to the promise!"

"I don't doubt you," came a queer, high-pitched whine. "Of course I don't doubt you, Falardo, my friend. You say it is impossible for me to find, myself, where your treasure is? I can understand. But you will lead me to it—yes, you will do that—I believe you. And it is true that space is dangerous just now. Ah, that meddling patrol ship!"

Stranger than the whiny voice was the man from whom it came. He was a giant in size, but the mighty bulk of him was, far from being impressive, only ludicrous. He was made of rolls of fat. A great, sagging paunch, flabby arms and legs, drooping shoulders—a face whose cheeks lapped down over the jaws—bluish, pallid lips—tiny pig-eyes almost lost in the sweat-beaded expanse of sickly skin—this was Haklut, he who had been called the last of the pirate chiefs.

And he sat among his wealth.

The passage curved to an end here in a large, irregular chamber. The floor was wide and had been leveled off, but stalactites thrust their inverted spires down from the ceiling and glittered in the flare of electric torches stuck in the walls. The whole was a scene of barbaric splendor.

Rich stuffs lay piled around. Vessels of gold gleamed where they had been piled. There were massive safes that had been ripped from the captains' cabins of space ships; there were valuable ships' instruments—clothing of woven platinum, mounds of rare Martian karlite—— Money and jewels, no doubt, in the safes—— Here in this dank, evil-smelling cavern was the loot of one of the most successful—and infamous—buccaneers of space.

Haklut sat propped up on a low, old-fashioned ship's chest. His eyes

were downcast, looking at the cunningly worked poniard which he held in one hand, dawdling it and playing with it as might a child. His men lay sprawled around him, at least thirty of them. Standing facing him was Falardo, the princess of Venus by his side. Baichel sat to Haklut's right.

The guard behind Davenant shouted:

"Here they are, Haklut!"

The huge head raised, the little eyes narrowed against the shadows. The man's sweaty face quivered, and he smiled.

"Oh, yes—Captain Davenant!" he whined. "Bring him. I would like to see him."

Davenant was pushed before the bloated body. Silence fell. The pig-eyes squinted at him, searched his face, while the bulbous fingers slid idly up and down the poniard's edge. Davenant returned the inquisitive gaze squarely, his face impassive, his hands crossed before him—but it was not Haklut's presence he was most aware of. Again he was close to the woman, the dark-haired Tuaris in her flowing metallic robe; and he felt resting on him the deep, mysterious beauty of her eyes, felt the whole charm and wonder of her—and she gave him strength. The musty cavern was forgotten—the circle of sprawling buccaneers, the rankness of the air—forgotten, for that moment, the wretchedness of his own body, and the odds against him, and Falardo, watching him, too, and Haklut——

"And this is Captain Davenant—— Yes, yes, we know of you, captain. We've been rather fearful of you, at times, do you know that? And here you are. I did not expect you to find my black ship—and here you are. So. So——"

It was a singsong whine. Sweat rolled down the pouches of skin, and the great belly quivered and panted as the mouth sucked for air.

Davenant shook off the spell of the woman and looked at him. This thing in front of him, propped on the low chest—childish, it seemed, but corrupt, and obscene——

"Well, Haklut? We are in your power—what now?"

"Ah, yes, captain—what now? That's right, you get to the point so quickly. Well, we'll see, we'll see—— I suppose, in the end, I'll give you over to my friend Falardo, here. Perhaps he'd like to have you. Ah, it was cruel, captain, what your Earth was doing to him."

"It was just."

The pig-eyes were wandering. They seemed dull, uninterested. "Just?" he mumbled. "Hm-m-m. So—— So—— You know the radio code of the service, captain?"

The question emerged suddenly from the jumble, yet was utterly casual. The eyes still wandered over the cavern. Davenant said:

"Every Service captain knows it."

"Yes, yes, I have heard. Tell me. Yes, I'd like to hear it."

"That's impossible."

"Hm-m-m—— So—— So——"

Davenant started; his lips clenched to hold back a cry of agony. A searing pain had slashed down his leg. Idly, one monstrous arm had reached out and drawn the edge of the poniard down the flesh of his left calf to the boot. Guards jumped to either side to hold him. The pig-eyes squinted up at him curiously.

"You'll never learn it from me, Haklut—nor from any man of the Service!"

"So—— So——"

The point of the poniard veered around. The brigand's men watched with grinning faces. From among

them sounded a smothered chortle, and the whisper, "Old Haklut!" The dark eyes of the Princess Tuaris were wide.

The poniard dug sluggishly through Davenant's right boot, entered the flesh.

"You'll never get it!"

He grated it through locked teeth. His cheek muscles stood out like welts. Ribbons of sweat rolled down his forehead.

Haklut sighed; withdrew the poniard. He shrugged—a ripple passing over the fat. Then he lolled back on the chest, an expression of boredom on his face.

"Take him away. I'm tired. Take him away. Bring food."

Baichel jumped forward. "To the island, Haklut?"

"Of course to the island, idiot! Where else? A little later, captain. Later. The code soon enough. A few weeks on the island—— Bring food, you swine! How long must I wait?"

Davenant was gripped, shoved back, his men driven behind him. Down through the dripping gloom of the cavern they stumbled again. He limped from the fire in his foot. The tumbled wealth, the gold and glitter of the loot of Haklut, the hard glare of the torches, the sprawled, grinning men, the weapons and the feeling of blood and something obscene, the dark face of Falardo and the shining beauty of the woman—the great bloated figure of Haklut, like a Chinese idol—this scene, these people were lost in the darkness behind; they were gone, as if they had been but the color-splashed painting of some wild dream; the horror, the ugliness, and the beauty that stood supreme and alone amid it—gone, buried in the pinnacle of rock on this gray, savage world.

VIII.

IN AN air-propellered tub-shaped boat, over which the waves came slashing, Davenant and his men of the Service were huddled and steered out from Haklut's island into the froth and snarl of the rain-pitted sea.

They stared at the gray horizon. There it loomed—Haklut's prison—the black, dismal mass of the other island, several miles away, half lost in the swirling clouds.

Slowly the boat crawled toward it, bucking and rearing in the waves. Once—Davenant did not see it clearly—some massive thing reached up from a whorl of water, to fall again suddenly. Things moved under the surface of the sea. Life was there.

The Service captain sat bowed, shivering, his head on his chest. He was wet to the skin, his leg ached, and his boot was full of blood. The others lay, wretched and shivering, around him, their faces bluish-gray. Even Hartisborne could not bring to his lips his customary grin.

After a long time, the prison island loomed before them. It was like the other in its piled mass of rocks and jagged shore, but smaller. There was no wide cavern opening here. It was utterly exposed to the rain and the sea and the wind. And from it came the same nauseous odor of rotting fish.

The boat bumped against a ledge of rock. "Pile out!" their guards shouted, swearing at the wind. They held the boat there with difficulty. The Service men rose and clawed at the rock, hauled themselves on top. One pirate followed them. While ray guns covered them from the boat, he produced a key and rapidly freed their wrists from the cuffs. Then he scrambled back,

the boat swung away, and a mocking arm waved to them.

"Just help yourselves! Plenty of fish—all you do is catch them! Make yourselves at home!"

The boat was soon lost to sight. They were alone.

Ten of them there were, standing, crawling, peering about, shivering, their teeth chattering in spite of the oppressive humidity. Davenant took command.

"Let's find some kind of shelter. We'll be dead of fever if we stay exposed."

They scrambled up the mounds of rock. Higher on the island they found an overhanging ledge which offered half protection from the blasts of rain. They crouched beneath it.

They could only occasionally see Haklut's island. Shreds of mist drove by them; wind demons whistled in the splits and crevices. It was a place of the damned.

A lethargy seemed to be creeping over Davenant's senses, a haze over his eyes, dulling even the pain of his wounds. He fought against it, but it was hard. As in a dream, figures took shape before him and melted away again—the lithe, strong body of Falardo; the hideous bulk of Haklut; and the woman—the woman—she of the dark wealth of hair, the brooding pools of eyes. Tuaris, the ever-mysterious, the ineffably beautiful. Falardo's! She had given her life and love to him, he who was more evil than Haklut! The lost Princess Tuaris——

He drove her away. He looked up, forced a smile.

"We'll get out of this," he said. "Brace up! It's not so hopeless as it looks."

"Get out?" his navigator inquired dully. "I hope so, sir—but——" His voice tapered off.

"Something's going to happen over on that island," the captain went on. "I understand it all now. Haklut consented to try and rescue Falardo on the promise of Princess Tuaris that Falardo would give him part or all of his treasure hoard, wherever it is—that fabulous store of gold that they talked about so much on Earth. Falardo's told Haklut that he—only he, personally—can lead him to it. He's just waiting for an opportunity to double-cross Haklut and get away with the woman. But I'll bet Haklut knows it, and I'll bet Falardo makes a good attempt in spite of Haklut—and when he does—well, maybe there'll be an opportunity for us, too, in the confusion."

"God help us if we have to wait for that," some one said.

Davenant shrugged. "Perhaps we can figure some way to get to the island. What have you in your pockets?"

They looked, but found they had been stripped. The search produced nothing but a piece of string, a nail file, a few scraps of paper.

"Not much good," Davenant admitted. "Still, an idea will come." He hardly believed it himself, but some hope had to be held out to the men. "Now we need food. Fish, I guess. Must be some—or something—in that water. Others have lived here before us, I suppose."

"And died here," Hartisborne interposed grimly. He scanned the dismal scene. "God knows what agonies have been endured here! Poor devils, taken from ships, to starve slowly——"

He broke off. Their heads turned suddenly. From somewhere outside had come a sound. It came nearer. And then above them they heard a cry, and words:

"Who are you? Great God!

Service men? Service men? Davenant—Hartisborne—*you?*"

They saw a pitiable wreck of a man come crawling down the rocks above. More than half naked was his scarred, emaciated body; the ribs and bones stood out like laths. Long, matted hair straggled about his peering face with the wildly staring eyes, and tangled hair grew from the chin and cheeks. A forlorn, half-delirious derelict of this island of the lost; to their eyes, a madman.

A moment—then Davenant jumped forward, stretched out his arms, caught the bag of skin and bones, helped it down, held it, and stared into the face.

"Vaughan!" he choked. "Jack Vaughan! You here! This is where they took you!"

The other men encircled the starved figure. They recognized the lines of the face under the beard; noted the gray rags. Vaughan he certainly was—Lieutenant Vaughan of the patrol ship *Castreo*—the ship that had disappeared from its lonely beat in space four months ago, and had never since been heard of.

"Yes, I'm Vaughan" he chattered. "But you, Davenant, Hartisborne, the rest of you—how came you to this hell?"

"We were gassed, overcome by a trick, the *Hotspur* captured. You might have seen her come down, behind Haklut's black ship," Davenant said. "But where's the rest of your crew?"

"Gone. Gone, long ago. Taken from here, never brought back—— I didn't see you land. I must have been asleep. I sleep so much now—— I'm the only one left." He paused, shivered. "But it won't be much longer——"

Davenant was half holding the weak body. He said quietly:

"No, it won't be much longer, Jack—we're going to get out of here. You'll be back in the Service soon, healthy and fit."

"Oh, not from here! We thought so, at first, all of us—but as the days went by—— Don't think you can! It's only more cruel when you find out——"

"But it's not so far to Haklut's island!" Davenant protested. "In some way, we'll get across to it, even if we have to swim."

"Swim? *Swim?*" The man laughed hysterically. "Watch!"

He bent over, scrabbled around, found a loose piece of rock, picked it up, then rested. The effort even this slight motion required was evident. Davenant took it from him with a gentle hand.

"Go easy, Jack. What do you want to do with this?"

"Just throw it! Out into the water!"

The men were puzzled. Davenant started to ask a question, but did not. "All right," he said.

"And watch where it hits!"

The Patrol captain hurled the piece of rock far out. It had not even reached the surface of the water when the thing happened.

A monstrous, scaly green claw scooped up, and with speed that was amazing it seized the rock—and with such vicious force that it was distinctly seen to crack in two. Then the claw was gone, and the waves piled along as before.

Davenant remembered what he had sensed while crossing on the prison boat—the life beneath the ugly gray surface.

"What was it?"

"There are thousands," the gaunt thing that had been Jack Vaughan of the Service said wearily. "Monsters like crabs, only quicker. They swarm down there. Once in a while

they come clambering up here. Then you have to climb for your life, up to the top! You can't swim to Haklut's island. You can't get away. Not till Haklut sends for you—when they think you're dead enough to tell what you know, and be glad to. And even if you did tell, I guess they kill you after—— No. No. You're here to stay——"

Stephen Davenant stood lost in thought.

"I think there is a way," he said. "I think there is a way."

He had listened intently to what Vaughan had said about the monsters below the surface. Now his eyes turned away—out over the whip and snarl of the sea.

Hartisborne said:

"But how away? You heard Vaughan!"

"At least, I think we can get over to Haklut's island."

"How?"

"By capturing one of those crab-like things," Davenant said. "Then by riding it."

Their mouths dropped open. Then came Vaughan's cracked, half-crazy laughter. "Steve!" he gasped. "Is this place getting you already?"

"Yes," Davenant murmured, "by riding one of those things across." He seemed not to have heard the other. His eyes shifted around slowly. "But we'll have to capture it first," he said.

IX.

NIGHT CAME to this dim world with the abruptness of a suddenly drawn curtain. Without warning, what light had filtered through the eternal sky of clouds was gone. How many hours it lasted, they did not know. Davenant set a quick-changing watch, despite the uselessness of it; it was a routine that for morale's sake was important. And so, in utter dreariness, the night passed, while the men clung to what sheltered places under the ledge they could find.

The night—and three quarters of the next day. By then their trap was finished.

Davenant had picked the place for it carefully. It had, first, to be on the side of the island facing away from Haklut's. Then, a wide ledge of rock shelving upward. This lay-out was difficult to find, and locating something that approximated it entailed many bruised knees and gashes in hands and feet. But at last they had the best there was; then, after Davenant had posted three of his men on the opposite side of the island, both to look for shell-fish for food and to prevent any possible watcher on the pirate stronghold from becoming suspicious, they toiled through hours of back-breaking labor. And at last the thing was finished.

It began at the sheer fifteen-foot-high rampart of rock that ended the upper side of the ledge they had chosen—two walls of the largest boulders they could find, parallel, a space of ten feet between them, running all the way down the shelving ledge to the sea. Two lines of boulders, forming a U-shaped trap.

They had picked several score more of smaller boulders. With these ready to hand, they ranged themselves along the upper sides of their wall. Davenant and Hartisborne stood on the upper rampart and surveyed their work.

"All right," the captain said. "Now all we need is bait—and probably human bait is best."

He grinned and took off his shirt. Hartisborne cried:

"Steve—not you!"

"No? Why not?"

"It's ten to one you'll be killed! And you—you're the skipper! You've got to stay here in charge!"

"I will," he promised. "Don't worry. You'll be surprised how fast I'll get up those walls. I'll be scared enough to jump clear off the island!"

"Nothing doing! One of us—not you!"

"Then we'll draw lots."

"Not even that," came a broken voice from the lower side of one wall. "I'm the one."

Davenant looked, as did the others. Jack Vaughan had spoken. He stood there shaking, his body inclined forward. His thin, hair-matted face was pale.

"I'm the one," he repeated—then stilled Davenant's spontaneous protests. "I'm finished, anyway. I know. I know. I've seen them go before. The fever—— I thought it would be yesterday—but not quite." He shivered. "Never get back to—Earth——" He roused, and something of the spirit of a vanished day came to his voice. "But I'm still in the Service! I'm still working for the gray!"

At once he did the unexpected. He turned and slid down the rock, to land sprawling in the lower end of the trap, between the walls of stone.

Davenant made to go after him. "Wait! Jack, for God's sake——" But a strong hand held him back, and Hartisborne's voice, dull but steady, was in his ear.

"What he said was right, Steve. He couldn't last long. It is his wish, to go out this way. It's best. Let him."

The Patrol captain's teeth were clenched tight as he stared at the emaciated figure in the rags of gray below. His hands gripped, loosened again. He could not decide.

But the decision did not lie with him. Below, the human bait moved, and like men fascinated they froze and watched.

Jack Vaughan stepped down to the water's edge. Spray from a wave hissed up and drenched him; he shuddered, but his head held high. He lowered one foot over the rock. So he held himself, for all of a minute. His gaze drilled into the gray waste. He felt around beside him, grasped a small stone. He tossed it out into the water. He splashed his leg up and down——

The monster came.

It came heaving up from its murky lair with extraordinary rapidity. First a claw—three-foot-long pincers, saw-toothed. Another claw—suddenly, with a reaching slash. It missed its mark. Jack Vaughan stumbled back, with the grace of no more than an inch. The twin claws felt over the edge, slithered, held. The mass of the thing appeared.

It was much like a crab, grown to nightmare proportions. Its shell was easily eight feet in length, and almost as broad, green-colored, scaly, rank. Steely green feelers waved through the air before it; beady black eyes stared fixedly over a wide, part-opened beak. A second it paused, as if suspiciously. Then it rose bodily from the water—rushed up after the man into the trap—and the claws scooped down.

A shred of gray cloth fluttered away, but Jack Vaughan was gone from sight, beneath. There had not been a cry from him, or any sound at all, as he went alone from his captivity. His agony of slowly crumbling mind and body was ended.

A curse from Davenant brought the men from their daze. He cried: "Let go!"—and a shower of rocks crashed down on the eyes and little

brain of the giant crab, that now was standing motionless over its prey.

The monster thrashed, scuttled blindly to left and right, only to be repelled by the walls of rock. Its claws jerked spasmodically, flailed in the air, and reached for the attackers it could not see. Then it seemed to sense them. It clattered up to the end rampart, and reared high. A small boulder hurled from Davenant's two hands thudded into the fore part of the shell. A crunch and rending splinter sounded, and the thing fell back, quivered, and was still.

But there was no shout of triumph from the hard-breathing men above. They were silent, and their eyes went down to the gashed, quiet form of the man who had been Jack Vaughan.

They reclaimed his body first. They carried it to a place high up, one protected from wind and rain. Then, with the same rocks they had used to kill the thing he had lured with his life, they covered the body.

Davenant drove them sharply to work. He was curt, cold, almost rough in his directions. The implements had been selected before, keen splinters and sharp edges of rock. He gave them no pause; he worked with them, apparently tireless, digging into the thing with a cold, concentrated fury, as if avenging himself on the dead carcass. The tough white flesh was scraped out and piled around them; the exoskeleton partly dismembered.

When they were nearly done, a few squalls of rain fell; quickly grew into a solid, drenching downpour. The diffused light slipped from the sky of clouds; a wall of darkness began to lower over the water. Soaked to the skin, they hurried on, while lightning split the boiling clouds and a preliminary salvo of thunder rolled through the void above. Just as the last light faded, they had finished.

Scraped clean, the under part cut away, it was ready—the carapace of the crab—the great hollow back shell, eight feet long, nearly as wide, and four deep. A boat!

X.

FOR A PADDLE, Davenant had split half of one of the monster's claws, chipping the narrower end into the semblance of a handle. Testing its strength and finding it adequate, he stood beside the shell boat, the dark figures of the others clustered around him, waiting for his words. It was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead; the night was solid, except when, at irregular intervals, lightning forked through the wind and rain and clouds. Then the scene stood revealed in a savage, blinding glare: the dripping-wet rock beneath their feet, the flying froth and spray of the waves toward Haklut's island. It was a night to the devil's taste. The wind shrieked and moaned; above was the titanic tumult of thunder. And everywhere were the sheets of rain.

Davenant said:

"You'll know before morning whether I've made it or failed. It's not quite a hopeless chance. On Haklut's island they will probably be asleep. I'll approach from the side, and try to stalk any guards he has posted. A crack on the head for the first; then I should have a ray gun. I'll take the passage barefooted—stick up the cavern—make them bind each other. Then I'll force four or five of them to bring me here in the *Hotspur*. After that—well, that'll be all."

"Steve," said Hartisborne, "watch out for the lightning. It'll show you up."

"What can I do about it?" he asked. "It'll at least show the island up, too." He smiled at the tenseness of their faces. "Don't worry," he said. "I've a hunch it's going through. But if—well, if it doesn't, at least I'll see that they don't get on to the idea of the boat. So, if you don't hear from me—try it again. Right?"

"Right, Steve," said Hartisborne in a low voice.

"All set, then. Hoist it in the water."

He shook hands with each one of the nine. Hartisborne said:

"Steve, I think you'll come back."

"Not without the *Hotspur*, though, old fellow. So long, Harty."

He stepped into the shell. It carried him easily. A shove from the men sent it well out. The wind, fortunately, was from behind. A wave reared his craft high; spray came hissing over, raked him. He gripped one of the paddles and dug it in.

An hour later, he was—where?

Halfway, he hoped. With the wind, one or two miles an hour: that might be his speed. An infinitely slow, painful, laborious progress—for the shell boat had no keel; therefore, it had no steadiness; it whirled, twisted, staggered in half a dozen directions in as many minutes. It bucketed into waves, scooping up water; almost half of the time he had to spend in desperate hand-bailing. He stuck to it grimly. Every minute brought a crisis; every second was a fight without quarter. The rain, the waves—they became for him separate demons, combining with elemental strength to founder the shell, to send him below. They were personified, these forces; and he, a half-crazy, puny figure in that vast chaos, cursing them, breathing defiance at them, shouting his oaths with the thunder, joined body and soul with the fury of the night. He was no longer Stephen Davenant. He was Man—Man against Nature—Man fighting the age-old fight.

The storm—and the giants below. Kin of the one whose shell now bore the man, their scaly claws reached up from the water, came fumbling over the side of the boat, quickly to slide back when he slashed his paddle at them. At this he marveled and gave thanks: it was the Unknown they were afraid of, not the paddle, not him. Had they been able to see the nature of this carapace that rode inverted on the surface of their world, then in a second he would have been tilted over, and gone, gone more finally than Vaughan. But they could not see, and he went on.

The clouds lifted a little; the rain lessened.

Three quarters of the way?

More, he thought—but it was only a guess made from glimpses of the other island while a prong of lightning forked out from the clouds. He could see it quite clearly, then. He could not see any figures of men, but he could make out the slim, rounded hull of the *Hotspur*, resting still before the cavern mouth. Not very far; not more than another half hour—if he could last that long.

He feared that next half hour. He had told the others of his hunch, that he was going to come through; but now, somewhere deep within him, grew a strange feeling that another element was entering in.

What were they doing on Haklut's island? What, the dark-haired Princess Tuaris? Often he thought

of them, but ceaselessly he thought of her. More and more the spell and mystery of her beauty had called to his mind, until at last she had come to rule it completely, even here in the boat, above the agony of his fight with storm and wave. She was there alone. Her eyes were on him. He could not see her plainly, only the dim outline of her, and her eyes; there was a veil over her—— Tuaris, Princess Tuaris of Venus, lost to the ways of man, given to that one with the black brows and the dark heart and the mask of a face—— Tuaris! *But why this veil over your loveliness?*

Darkness—instant brilliance—the mad darkness again—but in that brief blanket of light he saw running at desperate speed from the black mouth of Haklut's cave two dark, tiny figures!

The mad darkness—and Davenant in his shell boat praying for it to end—and peering——

There came light on the island! At first a thin, stabbing pencil, blue-colored, coming from the cavern mouth. That would be the beam from a ray gun. Then more light—the flare of electric torches, jerking minutely about.

And then the lightning, again and again and again—and stark in its brilliance the *Hotspur* stirring, rising into the air! Darkness—then a barely perceptible point of light moved where the ship might then be. Light in the control cabin—those two figures in the control cabin—and the ship building speed through rain and wind into the void above!

Davenant stared with wire-tight, straining body. It was coming. "Fast! Fast, you fools!" he gasped.

A cone of sizzling blue shot up from the mouth of the cavern, felt for the fleeing patrol ship, found it, held for one second of time, then disappeared.

But its work was done. A thousand feet in the air the point of light slowed, stopped, with increasing momentum lowered, grew—came *for Davenant!*

Lightning—and there was the falling hull almost over him, falling, turning, a great gash in the stern! His breath left him; he crouched, tensed—waited——

There was a roar as metal plowed into water, a hissing and the high lift of a wave. Then a wild maelstrom, a wrenching, a twisting. Then, except for the rain and the waves, silence.

Less than a hundred feet from him he saw what was visible of the *Hotspur*. He could only make her out dimly, but he saw that her bow and half her length was above water, sticking up at a steep angle. Apparently her stern was grounded on the sea bottom, held steady there by her weight and the press of water. There was no light showing now.

He knew what had happened. Falardo had seized what he thought was an opportunity. He had made for the ship with the Princess Tuaris. The ray of Haklut's ship, the *Sronda*, lying just inside the cavern entrance, had brought them down.

Davenant peered toward the island. The torches still moved along its shore. Would they come after the ship?

Another sheet of lightning. It gave him brief, clear sight; the men of Haklut, too. The hull of the *Hotspur* was silent and still. Darkness—then he saw the torches on the island slowly disappear again inside the cavern. Were they satisfied that Falardo and the woman were dead?—that the craft was hopelessly

disabled?—or were they going in to man their own black ship, to bring it out and have a close look? He waited anxiously, to see. No further activity showed. Perhaps they would not examine the wreck until morning.

A question kept beating in the back of Davenant's mind all the time. Dead? Tuaris dead? But what else, after that awful dive and crash?

He paddled the shell boat through the darkness toward his old ship.

It did not take him long to reach her; soon he was bumping along the side of the hull. Whatever else was aboard, certainly there would be weapons. Ray guns! Power in his hands!

He knew how to get in. The midship entrance port was slightly under water. He risked the things that swam below; risked certain death in the loss of his craft. He took a deep breath and dove headlong into the waves. The shell sprang back. Little better than blind, he forced himself against the hull; groped for the familiar feel of the port's control knobs.

He was dizzy and there was a roaring in his head when at last he located them. He swung them over, braced himself, and pulled. The door opened a little; then more. In a swirl of water, he tumbled inside. At once the lock was nearly full, but he got a new breath and pulled tight the door. Strengthened a little, he opened the inner port door, swam through, and shot up above the water on the other side. He was inside the *Hotspur*.

XI.

FOR A MOMENT, the water, the sharp angle at which the ship rested, threw him off his bearings. He was in utter darkness, beneath him the sloping deck, and water up to his waist around him. It had entered through the grab in the stern; this was the sea level. Somewhere left, above, was the control room.

Then he knew to an inch where he was. He needed no light. After eighteen months of service in this ship, he knew every corner of her. This passageway led to the central one, running from bow to stern, on either side of which were the cabin doors—and at the end of which was located the control room.

As silently as he could, Davenant swam ahead, to the middle of the transverse passage, edged forward up the sloping deck, to where it met the central one. Feeling, he knew when he came to it. He turned and swam a little farther; found the floor; went forward and out of the water. But it was hard going. He slipped back two feet for every three he gained. From time to time he paused, listening, holding his breath. He could hear nothing.

Were they really dead, then, those two? Somehow, he could not believe so. It wasn't right that they finish like that. He had felt with every cell in his body that he and Falardo were to come together again in a last struggle. Their stars were crossed—Patrol captain and pirate—and princess of Venus. They could not be dead.

He hoped that they were unconscious: that would make it easy. But he took no chances. Quietly he continued to a door he knew well; put out a hand as certainly as if there had been light, and the next moment he had the good steel of a ray gun butt in his palm. Now, he thought, let anything come!

He stared into the wall of blackness, and edged upward again. A few more feet would bring him to

the door of the control room. He paused there—then stopped and froze.

Falardo's voice!

"Tuaris?" it was whispering. "Tuaris?"

It came from ahead—the front of the control room. There was the sound of a body slowly moving.

"Tuaris?"

"Yes?"

Her unforgetable voice! She was alive!

"Are you hurt, *marlitza?*"

"No. But you? Where are you?"

"Here. I am all right. The ship's in the sea—half under, I think. But wait. There's a flashlight here, somewhere——"

Davenant raised the gun.

A light sprang on—a thin beam that shot to the ceiling, then settled on the woman.

She lay outstretched on the floor, kept from slipping back by a leg of the chart table, which was bolted down. As the light reached her, she stirred, she sat up. She gazed around, uncertainty in her dark eyes, and a little fear. She was robed still in her soft white metallic robe. The light of her hair streamed over her shoulders.

"Show me yourself," she said softly.

The light left her, arced around, then shone full on the lean, hard face of the pirate. His eyes were as Davenant had never seen them before. The cold veil was gone. Something else was there, something deep and infinitely tender.

"We will come through this, Tuaris. I have a gun. Perhaps I can repair the ship."

"But—Haklut?"

"Probably he and his men think us dead."

Davenant stepped forward and around the jamb of the door.

"Stay where you are, Falardo," he said curtly. "Move, and you die."

The light went out.

Davenant snapped:

"I can hear you. At the first move——"

The light flashed on again. It stabbed straight at him, and blinded him. Like that, he was helpless.

Quickly he threw himself to one side, into the safe darkness, and at the same time a pencil of hissing blue light stabbed across the room. He felt its heat sear the skin of his arm.

"All right!" he shouted. "If you want it that way——"

He pulled the trigger of his own gun three times, as fast as his finger would work—and then shoved himself farther to one side. At once the pirate's ray pierced the spot where he had been.

The woman cried out:

"No, no! Stop, Falardo, and you, captain! Don't!"

"He must die!" That was Falardo. The spotlight stabbed for Davenant.

He shot at it. There was a grunt of pain. The light fell, went off, and the pirate swore.

"Only my arm, Tuaris!"

"Oh, stop!" she pleaded.

"Keep down. He dies."

His breathing hushed, every nerve of his body under icy control, Davenant wriggled up the sloping deck. He came to the chart table, eeled around it, then left, to the far side of the room. He could hear Falardo's breathing, several feet away. He stuck the gun in his belt, reckoned the distance, steadied himself, braced his legs, gathered every muscle, and launched himself outward and up.

His estimate was correct. With all his weight he hurtled into Falardo—took him by surprise—held on grimly, while his fingers reached

up for the throat. But the other was strong, and resisted with desperate determination, and they thrashed there, locked together, both cursing and fumbling for the other's throat. Below them was the woman, crying to them to stop, but she went unheeded. It had to be death for one.

How long that grim hand-to-hand struggle lasted, Davenant afterward had no idea. But suddenly, just as Falardo released his hold, trying for a better, something beneath them broke. Nothing to hold him, Falardo fell back, went tumbling down across the floor of the control room, and crashed into the far wall.

Had it knocked him out? Panting, trembling, Davenant listened.

No!

Again the pirate's ray gun spat its blue streak through the dark. It was wide of the Service man—but it brought into silence a shriek—then a half-sobbing sigh—then silence again——

Davenant felt something under his fingers. It was the flashlight. He turned it on.

The still form of the princess of Venus lay before him.

XII.

A CRY of animallike agony came from the man who crouched by the far wall. Falardo stared; his face was contorted; the gun dropped from a hand suddenly limp.

"Tuaris! *Tuaris!*"

He came scrambling crazily up the slope of the floor. He bent over the woman, and terrible panting sobs burst from his throat as he gathered her up in his arms. He put his face next to hers and held her close to him in a grip made rigid by horror. He whispered to her—whispered inarticulately, until, as no faint answer came, his voice rose again, and he sobbed.

Davenant watched, forgetting all else.

The man who stooped there clutching the beautiful form to him grew silent.

Davenant moved over to him. He touched him on the shoulder and said gently:

"Falardo."

The Black Eagle's eyes turned up. In a puzzled child's voice he said:

"She's dead."

"Yes."

"I shot her."

Stephen Davenant said nothing.

"I shot her!"

He seemed not to recognize the man beside him. His eyes looked vacantly around, then his gaze caught on Davenant's gun, a flicker of light appeared in the dull eyes, and reaching, looking at it fixedly, he said:

"Give it to me."

"Of course not."

"Give it to me! I can't stay behind! I can't, alone! I'm going to her! Give it to me!"

Davenant knew at that moment that he, too, had loved the woman. He knew suddenly why his spirits had been so high when he had stood in her presence. He felt in a flash, understood as never before, the utter devotion of Falardo——

He remembered where he was. He sighed, then sadly said to the man:

"Not that way, Falardo. Her body must not fall into Haklut's hands—nor must you—nor I, or my men."

"Haklut," the other said stupidly.

"And surely this ship has a little left in her. The ray struck her in the stern; the mechanisms below shouldn't be hurt. Let's have a look."

"Haklut."

It was a child he was dealing with. Falardo seemed to have lost all comprehension. This man whom nothing could break—one thing had broken. One thing—the act of his own hand. He had crumbled like a heap of drying sand.

Davenant left him—climbed higher and darted his light over the instruments and gauges in the front and sides of the room. Almost at once he found what must have stopped the ship. The fuel gauge registered empty!

With repressed excitement he hurried to the hatch in the control room deck and pulled it up. Below, in the light of his spot, stood revealed the massive energy-converter, and, by its side, the smaller fuel tank—cracked from top to bottom, and fuel in a pool over the lower part of the floor.

He turned to Falardo. Since explanations had brought nothing, commands might. He said curtly:

"Go down those steps. Open the manual feed-cock on the converter, and feed that spilled fuel into it. Give it all it will take—and keep it up."

"What?"

"*Go down there!*"

No gun was needed. Falardo—and yet he was not Falardo any more—rose dumbly and went down the steps. Davenant wedged the flashlight so that its beam played wide on the room below. He himself needed no light; he knew the exact location of everything.

He repeated his orders, more strongly.

Falardo stared at him out of stupid eyes. There was a foolish smirk on his face—to the other, a terrible thing to see. The man appeared to be slowly disintegrating while he watched.

But he obeyed the command.

Davenant climbed up and took hold of the space stick, felt for the power lever, and threw it over.

XIII.

A LOW HUM that skipped and stammered unevenly came into life in the room below. It seemed every second on the point of stopping altogether, but somehow it went on. It was like the beating of a weak heart.

A curious, tight sensation constricting his throat, Davenant made the test. He moved the space stick into its slowest forward notch.

And the *Hotspur* answered!

She stirred sluggishly, overcoming with an effort that seemed to strain every atom of her the dragging weight of water in her stern. She shuddered ahead, paused, lurched. The great uncertainty made Davenant's fingers delicate, fearful. He pressed the space stick to the right. Unwillingly, the ship edged her bow around, and staggered on.

The wind had almost died, only the rain continuing; but straight ahead now, very faintly in the blackness, there gleamed a lone light. Its glow marked the entrance to Haklut's cavern. Stephen Davenant, in the crazily slanting ship, crept toward it.

It was grotesque. The *Hotspur* bumped and slithered along the sea bottom, the front of her stuck up at a ridiculous angle, her speed little more than that of a man walking quickly. The waves washed up, flung their spray over her ports; behind, the water inside her splashed as it rolled from side to side. Occasionally there would come a dull jar, and he would almost fall from his post. He hardly dared think of Falardo below. If only he kept to

his job—went on dipping and feeding the fuel into that little cup! It would hold very little, and attendance had to be constant.

And the ship's forward rays!

He realized with a sudden sinking that he had forgotten to inspect them. No time now; he must already have been seen, and Haklut would get him. But surely the batteries were all right. They were below, in the same room with the converter; the crash should not have damaged them. It was a chance he would have to take.

His lips set. So be it! Everything, now, or nothing! All on one play! And if he lost—well, if he lost—what mattered it? For he knew now what had sustained him through these last terrible days—and now it was gone, gone from the world—— "And ever will you love, and she be fair!" Old, old words of an old singer; bitter words now to come into his mind! Beauty, too, must die, even when so great as hers; and love—— He thought of the poor bemused thing working on the deck below—— Falardo and Tuaris. Deep and strong and tragic had been their love, and now it was ended, with her body quiet on the deck behind him. And the dark man, too, would die, Davenant knew; and as for himself—what mattered it? One last thrust for his men on the prison island—and then let it come——

The ship lurched on. Carefully he tried a little more power. She quivered, but still responded. The dim light from the cavern was very close now. And the rays? Was there power?

Very close!

Davenant twisted around and shouted:

"Falardo! Falardo!"

A sound—faint, but an answer.

"Keep that cup full!"

He touched the space stick, and threw the power lever all the way over.

The *Hotspur* felt the lash and leaped headlong. She thrust three quarters of her wounded body from the sea, and, volplaning, stuttering, flung herself through the rain and spray directly at the cavern mouth.

And Davenant, sweating, saw the men pile out. Their guard had seen the approaching leviathan—and that was all right; that was what the man at the space stick wanted. Torches gleamed; a dozen ray guns began to spit wicked little streaks of blue; dark figures raced feverishly toward the hull of the pirate ship *Sronda* to get at the ray that once already had struck the *Hotspur* down.

Davenant jumped to the controls of his bow rays, and with the whole weight of his body pulled them over.

He didn't mind what happened then. The brutal, crashing impact that tore the *Hotspur's* bow plates and flung him against the rear wall; the sharp crack that came as his left arm broke; the sight, down the hatch, of the mauled thing that had been Falardo lying crookedly beside the fuel tank—none of this mattered. For, the second before, he had seen the clean cone of the *Hotspur's* rays stream from the projectors and bathe in a fierce caldron of blue all the men around the cavern mouth!

The ship had struck her last blow for the Service. It was a good blow, and it had conquered.

Then Stephen Davenant fainted for a little.

He came to with rank acid fumes in his nose, a curious haze before his eyes, a drunken, sickening swimming in his head.

He choked and gasped. He would have to get out! He tried to turn over, but his left arm would not work at all. Then he remembered;

and using his right arm he managed to get to his knees. Dimly, through the haze, he saw the tear in the bow. On hands and knees he crawled up to it, and tumbled through.

A little clearness came to him, then. He raised, and saw the desolation the *Hotspur* had wreaked. A torch lay still lighted on the rocky ground, and in its hard, sharp light showed several crisp and crumbled bodies of Haklut's men. Davenant sank back. The rain beat down on him. There was utter silence.

And then something moved.

Furtively, fearfully, it came stealing out of the cavern. It was a monstrous thing—fat, with a huge sagging pouch and rolls of flesh for arms and legs; a thing with skin sickly gray, perspiring, wheezing for air, with little pig-eyes that darted from left to right. It paused when just outside the cavern, stared, and dragged its fingers over the sweaty pouches of the face. Then it saw the Service man.

The mouth grimaced. A long, cunningly worked poniard came from its sheath, and the huge form lumbered toward the man on the ground.

With an effort, Stephen Davenant fumbled for his ray gun, found it, and dragged it out. He sighted the thin barrel. The monster, no more than ten feet from him, whipped up its poniard arm and flipped it—and screamed. The weapon struck on the rock beside the seated man.

Very slowly, Davenant squeezed the trigger of the gun. The blue streak sizzled forth. The monster's great arms flung high; its obscene mass of body shuddered; and Haklut, the last of the pirate chiefs, was gone.

XIV.

A DAY and a half later, ten men stood around the battered hull of the *Hotspur*. She rested on the place where she had first landed after her capture in space, but now her bow faced outward. There was a great rent in the bow, and another in the stern; but, inside, the fuel tank had been patched, and all machinery that had been injured in the crash clumsily but effectively repaired.

Stephen Davenant, his left arm in a sling, his face much thinner and older than it had been when he landed on this desolate world, looked up to the heavens with lackluster eyes. It was not a sky of low clouds that now hung above him. Miraculously, the clouds had cleared, and showed a sky of delicate blue. Off to one side, poised in supreme majesty, there was a dazzling globe—a colossal gem, circled by streaming, misty rings. Saturn ruled the heavens. They knew now that this world of Haklut's was one of that glorious planet's satellites.

"All right," Davenant said.

Two figures were lifted from where they lay by the men. They were carried into a cabin of the *Hotspur*, and laid side by side on the deck. They were placed very close together, the left hand of one in the right hand of the other.

Cruel marks disfigured the man. But something of power, and strength, of a dark, ruthless will—and something deeper and more subtle than these—still showed on his face——

And the woman—her beauty was new, and still unearthly——

Hand in hand, linked forever, they lay there.

"It is time," Stephen Davenant said.

All left, and gathered outside. The captain touched the key of a mechanism there. A hum of power

sang out. The *Hotspur* lifted her scarred hull. Smoothly she raised, and with mounting speed slid up into the delicate blue; and the rays of the far planet splashed opal on her hull. She went eagerly, bound for unknown deeps of space, on a journey that had no end. Ultimately, perhaps after centuries, she would pause in her long flight out, and swing instead in eternal circles around some star that broods in silence an infinity from the ways of man—until inside her the bodies that lay there were scattered dust—until, at the very last, the ship itself would sift apart and be gone. But even then the two would drift in quiet and peace through space——

In minutes, the *Hotspur* was a gleaming speck; and then she had merged with the blue.

Stephen Davenant's eyes closed. He stood so for a little, and none disturbed him. Then he opened his eyes, took in his men, glanced at the black ship *Sronda*, and looked once more into the heavens.

"I think that is all," he said. "Let's go home."

IN A Los Angeles suburb recently, police found a deserted automobile. In the car was a dead Chinese and a live rattlesnake. The snake's mouth had been sewed up; its poison fangs rendered innocuous. The police are still wondering.

A FARMER'S baby disappeared in Finland two years ago, and a long but fruitless search was made for the kidnapers. Recently, woodcutters, felling a tree, found the infant's skeleton in the topmost branches. An eagle had been responsible for the snatch.

SCOTLAND YARD has the photograph of a room in which a man was shot. Prominent on one of the walls is the picture of a girl. The bullet which killed the man passed through the girl's head in the picture. The girl was the one who shot him.

A DYING priest in Ceylon cursed a jewel, the famous Eye of Buddha, which a French soldier stole from a temple. The jewel left a trail of death and treachery behind it, came into the hands of a Jewish diamond merchant, and was confiscated by Frederick the Great, of Germany. The merchant, dying, repeated the curse, and predicted that a future emperor would rule only twelve weeks and that his son would live in exile. The kaiser's father ruled twelve weeks. At the close of the World War, the kaiser was exiled.

These staring, fire-bodied things were the creatures of Vesuvius.

by

Nat Schachner

FIRE IMPS of VESUVIUS

IT MUST have been four in the morning, when the dawn wind blows coldest, that Geoffrey Clive was awakened by the most terrific crash ever heard this side of hell. He sat bolt upright, the sleep dashed out of him, just in time to hear a second tremendous report that shook the bed with its concussion. The hotel heaved convulsively.

Geoff struggled to his feet and ran to the window, throwing wide the shutters. The harbor of Portici glowed blood-red in a strange unearthly glare; the sea whipped violently back and forth.

Vesuvius was in eruption!

Geoff snapped out of his daze and swore bitterly. He had not bargained on this when Carewe's urgent cablegram had brought him post-haste across the Atlantic. He was too late!

Professor Ernest Carewe, formerly noted vulcanologist at Harvard, had inspired young Geoffrey Clive with a vast enthusiasm for that fascinating subject. When Geoff had followed the normal course of college athletes and become a bond salesman, Professor Carewe had indicated his disappointment.

A piercing whistle rang from his lips—and the imps poured out.

"A good vulcanologist joining the Philistines," he snorted.

"One must make a living," Geoff pointed out.

"You wait. One of these days I'll be leaving Harvard, and I'll take you with me."

Geoff grinned wistfully. There was nothing he wanted more. "I'll wait," he promised.

Six months later, Professor Carewe had been appointed assistant director of the Royal Observatory at Mount Vesuvius, the only foreigner to be so honored by the Italian government. Geoff's heart had turned somersaults when he read the news, but days passed, and months, and no word from Carewe.

Then came the bombshell. A cable from Carewe, cryptic, urgent.

"Drop everything and come at once," it read. "Need you badly stop terrible danger." The signature was E. C.

The cable seemed purposely vague; even the signature showed an attempt at concealment. Clive had not hesitated a moment. Carewe was no madman; if he called to his former pupil for help, there was reason for it. So Clive had caught the

first boat to Naples, taken the train to Portici, arrived there too late to proceed with the electric up to Observatory Ridge.

Now he was too late, Geoff groaned to himself as he dressed in desperate haste. Carewe was trapped in the observatory, trapped by an eruption that seemingly he had anticipated. What did it mean? He hesitated, reached swiftly into his trunk for his automatic, thrust it into his coat pocket.

In thirty seconds he was out of his room, pushing his way through a struggling, wailing mass of scantily clad guests, abject fear stamped indelibly on every countenance.

Clive burst into a world of brimstone and destruction. The morning sky was a blaze of fire and thick black smoke. Huge cindrous rocks hurtled high overhead.

He was out in the open country soon. Straight ahead Vesuvius loomed, its flanks enswathed in dense, steamy clouds, its summit wreathed in flames. There were incessant rumblings and groanings, punctuated by terrific explosions. The ground trembled and heaved underneath; already, back in the city, buildings were crashing; the cries of the entrapped people reached all the way to Clive's ears.

Through the thick gloom, fetid with the smell of brimstone, he met villagers fleeing destruction, stumbling on their way to the coast. Geoff's heart ached within him, but, with teeth clenched, he forged steadily ahead. His job was to save Carewe.

He was halfway up the northwest side to Observatory Ridge, where the shallow valley through which the railway runs on a raised embankment makes a sweeping curve, when he heard a great hissing and splashing. He rounded the curve, and stopped short, despair welling in his heart.

A great river of fire confronted him, a gigantic serpent of molten stone, red within and hissing at every pore. It was moving down the valley, slowly but implacably, steaming, detonating, already lapping hungrily at the railway embankment.

Clive groaned. Had he come so far only to meet with death in its most fiery form? His eyes searched eagerly around. There, on a siding, stood a hand car, abandoned, forlorn. But what good was it! True, the twin steel rails were still inches above the lava flow, but in minutes they, too, would be covered.

It was madness to try to run that searing gantlet, but Clive, his mouth grim and hard, did not hesitate.

He ran to the hand car, was climbing on board, when he heard a whirring, roaring sound that seemed to come out of the sky. He stared upward in astonishment, his hand already on the handlebar.

An airplane was plunging through the steamy atmosphere in a long, twisting nose dive. It was heading directly for the crested lava. Geoff sucked his breath in sharply. But it banked as the left wing tip almost touched the fiery menace, and came crashing to the ground not twenty feet from Geoff. A helmeted figure pitched violently out, lay sprawled.

Clive looked at the narrowing path through which the rails went upward, looked again at the sprawled, silent figure of the aviator, and grinned wryly. "I am a fool," he grunted, and jumped off the car. He ran to the limp body, knelt in swift appraisal, to find life quite strong, heaved the man over his shoulder, sprinted back to the hand car.

In seconds he was at the handlebar again, took a deep breath as he viewed the fiery furnace ahead, bent

low, and pumped furiously. The little car leaped forward like an unleashed steed, straight up the path of the shining steel rails. Already the first ripplings of lava were washing against the wooden ties. The hand car shot into it, Geoff pumping with all the strength of his muscular back. The heat struck him full in the face like a blast out of hell. His clothes seared in a dozen different places, the skin on his hands clung smoking to hot handlebars, but he did not relax his furious pumpings. The lava lapped over the rails, the ties burned from under, sagging the steel ribbons perilously. But a last desperate spurt shot the car out into the open again, past the blazing inferno, into a comparatively cool area of rock and smoking soil. Then, and then only, after first carefully setting the brake, did Clive collapse.

He came to a while later, to find the strange aviator bending over him and shaking him roughly.

"Get up," the man ordered harshly, in Italian. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Clive understood; he could converse in the other's language, after a fashion.

He sat up indignantly, forgetting his hurts, and stared at his discourteous inquisitor. The aviator's helmet was thrust back, disclosing dark, proud features.

"I might ask the same question of you," Clive said with heat. "It should be enough for you that I saved your life."

"You saved my life?" the aviator asked incredulously.

"I'm beginning to feel sorry I did," Clive retorted. "When your plane crashed, I pulled you through that pleasant little valley on the hand car."

The man stared back at the unbroken level of lava. The rails were gone now, completely engulfed. He passed a hand across his forehead.

"Ah, yes, I remember now. A bit of flying rock hit my wing; I lost control." He turned ungraciously to the American. "Thanks," he said. "But I must ask you again who you are and what you are doing up here."

"You're too damned inquisitive," Geoff said coldly, "but I am in too much of a hurry to quarrel now. If it means anything to you, my name is Geoffrey Clive. I am an American, and am going up to the observatory to rescue my friend, Professor Carewe."

The man's eyes flashed keen interest. "Ah, yes, Carewe; I've heard of him. He is assistant director, is he not?"

"Yes. And now that I have told you who and what I am, I would thank you to reciprocate." There was a dangerous edge to the irritated young man's voice.

"Ah, yes." Strong, even teeth flashed in a faint smile. "Tomasso Mercelli, chief of public safety. I, too, am going to the observatory."

The observatory was plainly visible now, a cluster of buildings on a steep, slanting ridge. To the northeast rose the crater, enswathed in flame-shot clouds, rumbling and belching.

"Let's get going, then," Clive said.

The hand car shot up the steep incline under Geoff's sturdy ministrations, through hissing steam and rain, ash and falling rocks, while Mercelli held on to the side of the bounding car to avoid being thrown off.

The run was short, not over a mile. They reached the end of the tracks: the terminus of the railway and the commencement of the funicular that took visitors by cable car to the true summit of Vesuvius. The observatory looked deserted.

CLIVE JUMPED off, dashed for the domed central building with great leaps, his heart pounding furiously. Was Carewe still alive? Could he explain what had happened? Where did Mercelli, who was right on his heels, fit into the picture? Questions that could only be answered if Carewe was alive.

He raced into the great central chamber, where the delicate seismograph instruments were embedded in solid rock.

"Professor Carewe!" he shouted.

The sole occupant of the vast room, a slight, elderly man, with thinning gray hair and heavy, bushy eyebrows from under which absurdly young and alert blue eyes sparkled, looked up from a sheaf of papers he was calmly examining. Vesuvius in eruption, the world blazing in ruin around him, meant only [illegible] fate and exact observations on volcanic disturbances.

The blue eyes lit up with recognition. He placed the papers in his hands very carefully back on the desk, bent over to take another look at the violently jumping stylus of the seismograph chart, and straightened up.

"Geoffrey Clive—I expected you about this time," he said simply. "Come, we have work to do." All in a calm, very matter-of-fact tone, as though Geoff had walked in from the next room—as though nothing untoward had occurred.

Clive grinned in spite of himself. He knew the old professor's idiosyncrasies. "But what——" he started, when Mercelli stepped forward.

"Professor Carewe?"

"Yes," said the little man.

The government official clicked his heels and bowed. "It is with regret that I must inform you that you are under arrest."

Clive started violently, but Carewe said quietly: "Why?"

"It has reached our ears that you are the head of an antigovernment plot, you and Emanuel Campanella, your coworker. You have by some devilish means brought Vesuvius to life."

"The source of your information is Fraschini, I suppose?" Carewe asked.

"Who else?" said Mercelli, drawing his gun and covering the little professor. "He is loyal; that is why he was made director. For a week now strange fires have dropped out of the sky, burning their way through roofs and walls, into the houses of the chiefs of the government. Last night a dozen high officials were found burned to death, warnings on asbestos boards beside their crisped bodies threatening all others with a like fate.

"At midnight, Director Fraschini phoned, fixing Vesuvius as the source of the plot and implicating you and Campanella as the ringleaders. He said he was going to stop it at the risk of his life. Then the call broke off suddenly. He phoned back. No answer, as though the wires had been cut. Soldiers are marching to surround the district. I came direct."

Passion darkened his countenance. "Where is Director Fraschini—and your co-conspirator, Campanella?"

Carewe said calmly: "They are both in the crater of Vesuvius."

Mercelli stiffened. "Dead?" he ejaculated.

"I didn't say that. Campanella disappeared last night at ten; Fraschini went out at midnight. They have not come back. There was little love lost between them. Campanella was antigovernment; theoretically he was an anarchist. He used to expound his philosophy

to me, but I never took him seriously. Fraschini—well, you know his loyalties."

"He was a devoted member of the party."

Carewe sighed. "Possibly! I preferred Campanella. But personal likings do not excuse the horrible things that have been done. Vesuvius in eruption, blotting out cities, causing untold suffering to thousands of innocent people; assassination by things of fire hurtling through the air—these are the workings of a depraved being. We must put a stop to them."

Mercelli said coldly: "You lie. You and Campanella both have done this. You have killed Director Fraschini."

Carewe sighed again. "No one is so stupid as a bureaucrat. We shall all go into the crater, and stop it—if we can. Time presses; each moment we stand here talking vainly means possibly hundreds of more lives lost. Come." He made a movement.

Mercelli raised his revolver. "No!" he said. "Your trickery shall not help you. Your fellow conspirators are waiting there. You think to get away."

Carewe faced him steadily, not a tremor of fear on his serene countenance. But his left eyelid flickered significantly.

Clive, who had been listening in a daze of bewilderment, came to himself with a start. He left his feet in a long, vicious tackle. His shoulder caught the knees of the official. The gun exploded.

Mercelli crumpled under the terrific impact, hit the floor with a thud that left him curiously limp and unmoving. Geoff scrambled to his feet, to find the little professor dabbing at a scratched cheek with a handkerchief.

"Thanks," he said calmly, as if being shot at were an everyday occurrence. "Now we can start. I had to wait for you; I am not strong enough physically for what is ahead. It may be too late."

"How about this fool?" asked Clive. "We can't leave him unguarded. He's just stunned."

Carewe looked contemptuously at the by now groaning figure. "Thick-headed, like all officials. They see only the obvious. Tie him up, so he won't interfere."

Clive found lengths of good stout rope and trussed Mercelli securely to a chair. He stepped back and surveyed his job with satisfaction. "That will hold him for a while."

The professor led the way into a smaller chamber, obviously a storeroom. He rummaged among the piled effects until he found what he was after. He drew out two strange suits—for all the world like diving outfits, except that they were made of a flexible gray asbestos material. Then, while Clive watched curiously, he drew out two helmets, again like diving helmets, enormous, with tremendously thick glass windows for the eyes. The helmets were of the same asbestoslike material, except that they were rigid. Within, Clive glimpsed two tiny tanks, fastened at the top.

"What are we going to do with those things?" he ejaculated. "Go diving?"

Carewe smiled thinly. "Yes, volcano diving," he said. "They are my own invention. I completed a supply of them a month or so ago. These suits are fire-resistant; even the glass is specially prepared for that purpose. Within the helmets, you may have noted, I have oxygen tanks for breathing, as well as tiny sending and receiving units, so that the explorers can talk with each

other. I tested them out recently and found them not more than comfortably warm in a bath of one thousand degrees Fahrenheit.

"I had intended exploring some of the old vents of the volcano. Campanello stole a march on me and found something down there that made him master of the volcano. I still don't know what it is he found." He shuddered, and his thin, scholarly face was grim. "But whatever it is, the result has been horrible."

They were clambering clumsily into their outfits as Geoff asked: "How do you know this Campanella is responsible?"

Carewe nodded. "I know. Campanella is a splendid vulcanologist, quite superior to Fraschini, the director, who is a surly, stupid sort of a lout. But Fraschini stood high in political circles, and accordingly, when the old director died, he stepped over Campanella's head, even though Campanella was the logical successor. It was known that Campanella was not exactly in sympathy with the government."

They had their helmets on, but Carewe kept on talking while clamping them into place. The communication units were functioning now.

"Campanella brooded over the slight," Carewe continued. "His normal anarchist leanings blazed into hot flame under the driving force of his personal indignity. He inveighed to me by the hour against all officialdom, seemed to regard himself as the appointed savior of his country. I tried to calm the man, but it was of no use.

"When I finished these suits, he slipped out one night with one. I saw him come back in the early morning. He was strangely exultant. 'I found old passages in the crater,' he whispered excitedly, 'and people down there!'

"I stared at the man, and told him in abrupt language that he was crazy. He was hurt at that, and withdrew into his shell. He stalked to his room, muttering.

"He avoided me after that; but I know he used to slip out of the observatory when he thought every one was sleeping. I saw him once at midnight, toiling up the path by the funicular, grotesquely clad in one of my asbestos suits. Last night I sat up purposely, saw him slip out. I kept on watching. To my surprise, at midnight, another figure crept out, similarly attired. I watched it until the mountain had swallowed it up. Then I ran to the director's room. He was not there. They never returned. Instead, Vesuvius broke loose."

Clive's head was in a whirl at the strange, fantastic recital. Campanella, embittered anarchist, in the depths of the volcano, unleashing horrible forces in his resentment; Fraschini trailing him, possibly lost, dead, in the fiery bowels; Mercelli, the chief of public safety, with the full weight of the Italian government behind him, bound helplessly in a chair; strange hurtling fires released on the world to work destruction—and, above all, old Vesuvius herself wreaking death and ruin on an innocent countryside because of man-made hates and contentions. He went grim at that. Could those two puny mortals control the mighty forces that had been loosed?

"We are ready now," Carewe was saying in his dry, calm voice.

The two men stepped out of the observatory. It was raining now; thick, weighted rain of the consistency of mud. The sky was dark and shot through with blinding lightning flashes.

Carewe's voice came to him. "We follow the funicular, to the level of

the crater. Keep right behind me, or you'll get lost." The microphones were working perfectly.

It was a desperate, soul-racking climb, but finally, panting and weary, they reached the edge of the crater, and looked down.

TREMENDOUS, AWFUL sight! The floor of the crater was a full thousand feet down, and partly covered with a lake of fire. Three huge vents spouted liquid magma. One wall was blown away, and a broad river of lava cascaded over. Fortunately, they were on the opposite wall, away from the area of eruption; otherwise they could not have lived an instant.

Geoff's heart sank. How could they ever find a practicable passage into the depths of that inferno! It seemed impossible for human beings to exist an instant down there. Campanella and Fraschini must have been burned to a crisp long since.

But Carewe was peering eagerly down into the abyss. Then he straightened suddenly. His voice came through the receiver with exultant clearness. "I've found the way! Come on," he cried, and without waiting, slid over the edge. Clive gritted his teeth, jumped unhesitatingly after.

They half slid, half fell down a steep declivity. Clive pawed desperately for support, envisioning with horrible clearness the lake of molten fire that awaited below, if his fall was not broken. The next moment he pounded into Carewe's asbestos-clad body, brought up sharply by a jutting ledge.

Carewe struggled to his feet. A smooth, round orifice, extending blackly downward, yawned in the side of the precipice. The professor shot into it, feet first. Geoff took a deep breath, heard a muffled shout. Then he, too, lowered himself into the bore, into jet blackness, and let himself go.

He seemed to drop interminably through space; then his feet struck with a solid jar. It had not been more than six feet. An arm came out of the inky depths to steady him, a voice resounded exultantly in his helmet.

"This is the way, all right," Carewe was saying. "We'll find what we're after at the bottom of this tunnel."

"More than we bargain for, possibly," Geoff assented dryly.

He stared into the palpable blackness. His gaze riveted. "I seem to see a faint glow, or the reflection of a glow, miles away."

"Come on, then," Carewe said impatiently, and gripped his arm.

Together they stumbled along what seemed to be a steeply slanting runway, not over six feet in diameter. They resembled two moles, crawling through the secret bowels of the earth.

The faint reflected glow at the end of their path grew slightly brighter. The tunnel swerved slightly to the left. The explorers stopped short, with a simultaneous cry. The round walls of the tunnel glowed cherry-red for an unfathomable distance ahead.

Clive groaned. "That settles it. We can't go any farther. Those walls are red-hot rock. This vent leads straight down to the central fires."

Carewe shook his helmet grotesquely. "Nonsense. Campanella made it. If he did, so can we."

"But——" Geoff started to expostulate, but was cut short.

"I'm going to chance it. I think our suits will protect us, if the red-hot walls do not extend too far. You are at liberty to turn back."

Clive choked back the furious words. "Lead on," he said deliberately.

"Good boy," said the professor.

The tunnel was a little wider now; smooth, as though artificially hollowed. Without hesitation, the two adventurers pushed into the fiery path. This was indeed to be a test of their asbestos suits; if they failed, they would be crisped to ashes.

The round cylinder of walls glared dazzlingly into their eyes. Underfoot the stone was soft and sticky, almost molten, and dragged at their thick asbestos shoes with an evil, sucking sound.

The interior of their suits grew rapidly warm; their bodies dripped rivulets of perspiration. Even the oxygen they breathed became moist and steamy. Clive gasped and pushed on as rapidly as he could, literally dragging Carewe along with him. The professor, with his lesser stamina, was weakening fast. Yet, rapidly as they traveled, there seemed no end to the fiery walls.

Carewe sagged suddenly. His voice came faint. "I—I can't go any farther. Leave me here, and go back. Save yourself."

Clive laughed harshly through the streaming sweat. "Can't return. It's too late. It's forward for both of us."

He stopped, thrust Carewe's unwieldy bulk on his shoulder, and staggered on.

The glare from the white-hot walls dazzled him; the blood in his head was roaring and beating with great pulses. Every breath of hot oxygen into his lungs was a stabbing agony. The weight of the limp body on his straining shoulder dragged him down, but with clenched teeth and fixed, glaring eyes he struggled on. Would the inferno never end?

He was delirious now; he was sure of it. When a man began seeing devils, he was through. For in front of his wavering vision, right in the center of the fiery path, staring at him from unwinking, red, round eyes that bulged out of a red, wedged-shaped face, stood the figure of a tiny being, not over three feet tall. It seemed transparent, as though fashioned of tinted glass, and warmed with an inner glow of shifting waves of heat.

Geoff groaned and almost dropped his limp burden. The vision was too frightfully clear to be anything but the last stage of delirium. He could even see the pulsation of a vitreous heart in that glassy body, could follow the sharp outlines of coiled intestine, ending in a stomachlike sac.

Geoff awoke from his daze. The figure in the path had not stirred, but he did not care. "Out of my way, nightmare or devil out of hell!" he shouted insanely, and staggered forward. Instantly the creature moved backward, with a queer, shuffling glide. Clive laughed crazily, and weaved in pursuit. A strange chase in the burning depths of the volcano!

Suddenly the walls seemed to expand rapidly, rushing away from him with infinite velocity. The tormenting figure of the imp grinned owlishly at him; only somehow it had dissociated itself into a multitude of leering, grinning brother imps, squatting on their haunches in a huge semicircle about him. Then everything exploded in a great puff of billowing steam, and Clive sank, unconscious, Carewe limp beside him.

Clive opened his eyes wearily. His head was throbbing, the skin of his face felt parched and cracked. Water—cool, blessed water—his whole being craved for it with a fierce, torturing thirst. A deathly silence en-

veloped him. He was lying on his back in a huge cavern, smooth and round, with walls of a strange, vitreous, transparent substance, illumined by interior fires. The imps, hallucinations of a fevered brain, were gone!

"I knew it," Clive groaned, and twisted painfully in his bulky outfit. Then he blinked, and sat up with startling suddenness. Through the heavy glass of his helmet he saw Carewe, still outstretched on the vitreous floor. But a figure was bending over him, fumbling at the helmet clamps. A human figure, dressed in ordinary street clothes. He was not incased in an asbestos suit, though the transparent ground glowed with iridescent fires. Something gleamed in his right hand, as he fumbled and worked with his left. It looked to Geoff's startled eyes like the keen blade of a knife.

All thought of pain left him. He clambered to his feet as swiftly as he could, lurched over to the kneeling stranger.

The man looked up at him, startled. He evidently had thought him dead. He bounded upward; the weapon drew back as if for a driving thrust. Carewe rolled over, groaned, and sat up weakly. The scene seemed to penetrate his dazed brain, for with a little exclamation, he, too, staggered to his feet. The stranger glared at the ungainly figures, and crouched. Clive moved forward slowly, tense, waiting for a sudden move.

The professor shifted his head, cried out suddenly: "Fraschini!" The name made reverberant clamor in Geoff's earphones. He stopped dead in his tracks, looked at the crouching, soundlessly snarling man. He, of course, had not heard the exclamation. Fraschini! That must be the director of the observatory, the man who had followed Campanella down into the bowels of the volcano. No enemy, this. But why had his knife been in his hand as he fumbled with the professor's helmet?

There was no time for coherent thought. Carewe had unfastened the front clamps of his helmet, thrust it back on its rear hinge, exposed his parched, seamed face. The skin looked slightly parboiled. "Signor Fraschini!" he cried. "We are friends. I am Carewe; this is an American friend. We came to help."

The man slowly straightened. He was of medium height, a thin, dark-skinned Neapolitan. His straight black hair slicked greasily back from a low, sloping forehead. His black eyes were narrow and slitted. They stared appraisingly at the two Americans, watchfully, deliberately.

Carewe's mittened hand was extended in greeting. Geoff was unfastening his helmet; evidently there was breathable air down in this marvelous glassy cavern, nor could the temperature be excessive.

Suddenly, just as Clive had thrown back his helmet, inhaled the warm, close, but not unpleasant atmosphere, Fraschini relaxed his guard. Clive had a feeling that the man had come to some decision. The director thrust his knife into a sheath dangling from under his coat; his face lit up with a surprised, effusive greeting.

"My esteemed colleague, the American!" he cried, and pumped the extended mittened hand with his bare one. "I did not recognize you. How in the name of all the blessed saints did you come down here?"

"By the same path that you and Campanella took," Carewe said gravely. "Vesuvius is in eruption; the whole country is devastated. I came for the same reason that you

followed Campanella—to stop it, if I could."

Fraschini's eyes narrowed; his brow darkened perceptibly.

"Campanella, the traitor!" he spat. "It is true; I knew he was up to devilry. I followed him secretly. I was too late; he got away; he is hiding somewhere in these immmerable chambers, his devilish work going on."

Clive watched the man with distaste. He did not like him. Yet he murmured polite greetings when the professor turned and introduced Geoff to the director.

"How do you account for this cavern, with its glowing transparent walls, and air?" Carewe asked.

The director shrugged his shoulders. "No doubt it was formed by a huge bubble of volcanic gases when Vesuvius was plastic. The tremendous heat vitrified the lava into transparency. Those flames we see must be the reflection of far-off fires in an active vent of the volcano. That is why it is not too hot in here. As for the atmosphere, there may be an opening somewhere into the outer world, through which the cold air is sucked as the heated air escapes."

"A very plausible scientific explanation," Carewe admitted; "yet somehow I have a feeling that this cavern is artificial, formed by thinking beings."

"Bah!" Fraschini scoffed.

Clive spoke suddenly. "What about the fire imps, director?"

Carewe looked at him in amazement. He had been unconscious when Geoff had seen, or thought he had seen, the weird little beings. But Fraschini's dark face went white; he took a short step backward. "You—you saw them!" he croaked.

"Yes."

The director looked fearfully around. The sweat oozed from his oily forehead. He burst out: "Those damn devils! Campanella has them trained; they do his bidding. Let us escape, before it is too late!"

Carewe was staring strangely. "The fire people; the crafy myth come true. Then Campanella has found the means to send them out of the volcano, through the air, to definite goals."

The director looked his astonishment. "What do you mean?"

Carewe explained. The warnings delivered to the government officials, the final wholesale destruction of the leaders when the threats had failed. It was the story Mercelli, the chief of public safety, had told.

"Then we must find him!" Fraschini shouted. "We must find and kill him!" There was no questioning the hate that gleamed from his slitted eyes. "I have been searching all day, through passage after passage, and found no trace."

Clive's brows contracted, but he said nothing.

"Let us work fast, then," said Carewe. "You will need your suit, Signor Fraschini. And we need water badly."

"I have my suit hidden in a crevice; I took it off when I found this place. It was more comfortable without it. As for water, I found a pool. I'll get some. Then we can start."

"We'll go with you," said Clive.

The man's eyes darkened. "No!" He spoke hastily. "It is but a little way." And before Geoff could answer, he was off across the great glassy cavern, trotting fast.

Clive watched him reach the wall, worm himself through a hole in the side, disappear from view.

After a perceptible interval, Fraschini was seen climbing out of the hole, clad in his asbestos suit, the

helmet thrown back. He was carrying a soldier's canteen.

"Here, drink," he said, lifting the flat metal container, and tilting it. The Americans needed no second invitation; they drank eagerly. It was warm, stale, and heavily impregnated with sulphurous gases, but to the thirsting men no wine had ever tasted so ambrosial. "I took the precaution to carry a canteen down with me," Praschini explained.

Surfeited, the Americans relaxed after the last drop had been drained.

"Now we go this way," the director said, after they had clamped the helmets into position and the communicating sets were working. He pointed to a wide, angled passageway that sloped into darkness from the farthermost rim of the cavern. Clive turned a longing glance at the little hole Praschini had crawled into, but followed the other two obediently.

IN SILENCE they plunged into the gloomy passage, faintly glowing from the reflected light of the cavern. It led by devious twists and turns deeper and deeper into the bowels.

Suddenly the gloom lightened. There was a deep, reddish glow ahead. Praschini stopped short, whispered: "He is there. We must be careful."

Clive smiled grimly to himself as very quietly they crept forward. The passageway curved abruptly into a larger cavern, smooth, glassy, lit up with internal fires, like the one they had previously quitted.

But what held their startled attention was the sight of a man, clad in an asbestos suit, the helmet tilted back, stooped over, intent upon something. Clive caught a profile view of a tall, tawny-haired Italian, with straight, firm nose and ruddy cheeks, of the type that Giorgione loved to paint. Then Geoff sucked his breath in sharply. For the man was bent over a series of levers connecting to a glinting, metallic platform, from which strange vitreous tubes rose in a forest of columns. They glowed with a bluish flare. On the platform stood a flame-tinted imp, his transparence showing clearly the beat and pulse of human-seeming organs, his wedge-shaped face upturned submissively to Campanella, as to a master. Directly above, in the curved-over ceiling of the cavern, was a hole. Liquid magma filled it from brim to brim; it raced along in swift current, upward, yet miraculously not spilling a single fiery drop into the chamber beneath.

Carewe gripped Clive's mittened hand hard. Here then was the arch-villain, the brilliant vulcanologist, who, to gratify his antigovernment sentiments, was plunging countless thousands of innocent people into ruin and death. Geoff started forward in blazing anger. His one thought was to kill the author of all this misery. For all he knew, Vesuvius overhead was still belching forth its far-flung rocks; all of Italy rocking in the throes of tremendous earthquakes.

Praschini's hand pulled him back. "Are you mad?" he whispered in a fierce, low voice. "We will all be killed if you give us away. Look what is there!"

Clive stopped short, and looked. He saw then what he had not noticed before—a horde of fire imps squatted against the farther wall, their vitreous, transparent bodies almost imperceptible against the vitreous wall. Their round, staring eyes were all concentrated on the man at the levers and their comrade on the platform.

Carewe whispered: "We must wait for our chance. What can he be doing?"

The three men crouched in the angle of the passageway, watched the proceedings with bated breath. Campanella straightened from his stooping position. He nodded to the queer little fire imp; pulled a lever. Instantly the vitreous columns glowed with fierce fires. The metallic platform sparkled with a thousand dancing flames. It quivered and shook in tremendous vibration. The flames leaped fiercer. Suddenly the imp shot straight upward, as though hurled from a catapult. With dizzying swiftness he hit the hole in the ceiling. His body disappeared into the flaming, flowing magma, was swallowed up in fire. The racing current quivered like a jelly for a moment, then smoothed out to a ripplelless flow. The imp was gone, swallowed up.

Carewe's voice trembled in Clive's earphones. "God, what are we up against? That devil Campanella has subjugated the imps of hell and the forces of science to his will. That vent above must lead straight up to the mouth of the volcano. He has mastered somehow a directional force that sends those messengers of death on their appointed courses. Who knows what official is going to be stricken down with that thing of fire?"

Fraschini said nothing, but Clive could see a peculiar light in his narrowed eyes through the glass of the helmet. While they crouched there, unwilling spectators, three more of the imps were sent on their errands of doom. Then, seemingly, Campanella had enough. He shut down the tubes until they stood lifeless; his mouth moved in words that were soundless to the listeners. He was addressing the squatting, watching imps. They rose, as at a signal, melted imperceptibly into a farther passage.

Clive waited a minute. Then he whispered: "Now's our chance!"

Three shapeless, bulky figures ran clumsily out into the great cavern, straight for the tall, absorbed figure of the man. He did not seem to hear their approach until they were almost upon him. Then he looked up, startled. His fingers went to his mouth, but Geoff dived headlong, catching him around the knees, and brought him crashing to the ground. Fraschini and Carewe flung themselves upon the fallen figure. There was a moment's struggle. Then Carewe's voice, sharp, commanding: "No, don't!"

Clive gathered himself up in time to see Fraschini's knife descending in a flashing arc to Campanella's lolling head. Geoff reached out and caught the director's wrist in a grip of steel, twisted sharply.

Fraschini howled with pain as the blade clattered to the ground.

"Damn you," he cried furiously, "why did you do that?"

"We do not permit cold-blooded murder!"

Fraschini's face in the helmet was a mask of hate. "He deserved it! He is a criminal, a menace to the nation!"

Carewe snapped: "Very likely he is, but the law will take care of him. We are not executioners."

The wounded Italian groaned weakly. The three men threw back their helmets.

"Sit up," the professor said sharply. The man did so, rubbing his great tawny head with an asbestos-mittened hand. There was a long gash across his forehead, where he had hit the floor. The helmet had twisted off its hinge; it lay, battered and useless, on the ground.

Carewe observed his groaning colleague with more of sorrow than of anger in his bright blue eyes.

"Why did you do these horrible things?" he asked softly.

Campanella stared back defiantly, proudly. "For the sake of the people. I gave the officials fair warning before I acted. They have tyrannized over us too long. All government is tyranny. It is our duty to get rid of it, and make the people free."

Carewe looked at the seated man with a tinge of scorn, of loathing.

"Whatever your political views, you have gone too far. You pretend to love the people! Yet you loose the incalculable forces of Vesuvius to overwhelm thousands of innocents, to bring untold ruin and suffering to the very ones you claim to cherish. You are a monster, a beast, to be crushed without mercy." The little man's eyes flashed with passion.

Campanella raised his tawny head suddenly. "What is that you say?" he cried. "Vesuvius is in eruption?"

Carewe said coldly: "Do not pretend ignorance. The whole countryside down to the harbor—Portici, Torre del Greco, Torre Annunziata—are buried meters deep in lava, because of what you have done with the volcano."

The man's eyes opened with horror. "I—I have done this!" he gasped. "I swear to you I know nothing about it! Since yesterday I have been down here; my plans were carefully laid. It is true I have sent my messengers to destroy all bureaucrats—they deserved it—but to loose the terrible fires of Vesuvius—no! They are my people down there, the people I am laying down my life for! Would I wantonly destroy them?"

The passionate appeal made the Americans pause. Fraschini's coarse voice interposed.

"You can fool soft-hearted Americans with your lies," he jeered, "but I am too smart for you. Your own confession is enough. You deserve death, and I shall execute the sentence."

Fraschini's arm flashed up suddenly, knife in hand. Clive gathered himself for a desperate spring. Campanella merited death, no doubt, but he could not stand by and see him killed by lynch law. The blade was halfway down, when the mitten of Campanella's right hand slipped off. Quick as lightning, the bare fingers raised to his mouth. A shrill, piercing whistle echoed through the cavern.

The sudden movement, the unexpected sound, froze every one in his tracks. The knife poised in midthrust. A swift pattering came to the astounded men, a pattering that grew into roaring volume. From a dozen unseen corridors there poured a stream of fire imps, their red, transparent, angular bodies glowing angrily, hundreds of them.

In seconds they had surrounded the little group of humans; a thick, compact circle, glowering, threatening. Though they were a dozen feet away, Clive could feel on his unprotected face the heat of their bodies. The knife fell from Fraschini's hand; his dark face oozed terror.

Campanella rose calmly to his feet. "The tables are turned, gentlemen. You forgot my good friends, the fire people." He turned and hissed something very rapidly. An imp on the outskirts of the throng scampered obediently to the platform and returned, forthwith, holding a coil of steel wire in his vitreous hands. Where he held it, it glowed red-hot. He tossed it to Campanella's feet from a distance.

Clive looked keenly about him. There was no chance for escape. The circle of glowering imps was solid; a fiery mass that would burn to a crisp any venturesome being who tried to force his way through.

Campanella picked up the steel wire, proceeded very deftly to tie up the three men. He talked all the while with the calm poise of a professor lecturing his class. His voice was easy, unhurried.

"Very convenient friends, these imps of mine. I found them on my first exploration, living down here in the bowels of the volcano, unknown to man. A strange race, evolved on different lines from any above. You will note their bodies; they are glassy, hot. The basis of their life substance seems to be silicon, rather than carbon; the heat of their bodies, their particular form of metabolism. Queer, that life down here should have molded itself on lavalike forms; but that shows the infinite adaptability of nature."

He bound Fraschini's arms with particular unction, disregarding the hate in the slitted eyes. "I made friends with them somehow, learned their language. Very simple, and very obvious, once you have the clue. I needed their help for what I intended. I had worked in secret for years on my machine to catapult material things long distances through the air. Originally I intended sending bombs by it, but that would have been too messy; might have killed innocent people."

Carewe snorted as he lay helpless. Campanella smiled queerly. "It is true. These people lent themselves much better to my scheme. They traveled along the beam, found their victim, destroyed him, and came back along the radio beam to their starting destination. They rather enjoyed it."

"What are you going to do with us?" Clive interrupted.

"Ah, that is a question," the man mused. "Fraschini I have no qualms about. He is a scoundrel. But you two have blundered in on me. I cannot let you go out into the world again to betray me."

He straightened up and hissed staccato sounds. The great circle of fire imps melted, moved with unobtrusive steps into the passageways from which they had previously erupted.

Campanella waited until the vast, rounded cavern was silent. "I'd rather not have them see me put you to death," he acknowledged, and strode over to the platform of the machine.

Geoff struggled unavailingly with his bonds. "Can you do anything?" he whispered to Carewe.

"Not a thing," the professor answered weakly.

Fraschini lay as if paralyzed, the fear of approaching death clammy on his forehead.

Campanella returned, holding a pencil-like steel rod in his hand. "A burning device to slit your throats," he said in what sounded like a regretful voice.

The tawny-haired man bent toward them. They were lying flat on their backs, near the entrance to the corridor from which they had wandered into this hell. Clive stared fascinated at the approaching, innocent-seeming rod. The tip was already glowing redly. It approached closer, was almost at his throat. He could feel the heat now, the bitterness of death welling within him.

Out of nowhere a dark body hurled past him, struck with vicious impact against the absorbed killer. He went down with a crash. The heating rod fell close to Clive's body. The two figures rolled over and over in

a thrashing, struggling tangle of asbestos-clad arms and legs. But Clive was intent on something else.

Very carefully he rolled against the glowing point of the rod, so as to contact the tip with the steel wire that bound him. The wire glowed and snapped. Even through his asbestos suit he could feel the tremendous heat. Campanella and the strange asbestos-clad figure were still struggling in a heap. Fraschini's eyes were fastened on them, his tongue screaming thick utterances.

Clive rolled closer to the professor. "Quick," he whispered urgently. "Move over to the rod. Burn your wire. I've snapped mine already."

Carewe nodded, twisted himself around until he made contact. The wire melted and parted. Clive braced himself for a sudden surge to snap his bonds, when the stranger thrust Campanella violently to the ground, rose, a pistol in his hands. With his free hand, he opened his helmet, but the pistol never wavered from the group.

Clive burst out involuntarily: "Mercelli!"

It was the chief of public safety, whom they had left securely tied at the observatory!

THE MAN turned at the sound of his name, and his dark features lit up. "The Americans," he said with satisfaction. "I've made a complete haul, I see." He smiled ironically. "You are not expert at ropes. I had no trouble in untying myself. I found one of your suits, and followed, at a distance. I wanted to see what your game was. I found out. This time you shall not escape me, my friends."

The director literally whined in his eagerness. "Free me, signor. I am Fraschini, the director of the observatory."

Mercelli spun around, lifted his hand in salute. "I am indeed honored in being of assistance." He knelt warily, his pistol covering the others, and unbound him swiftly.

The director arose, stretched his cramped limbs. Carewe made a movement, but a quick, warning nudge from Clive stopped him. They lay quiescent, seemingly helpless in their bonds. Campanella lay where he had fallen, sullen, resigned.

Carewe said quietly to Fraschini: "You will tell this stupid official that my young friend and I are not conspirators. That we came here to help you and fight Campanella, the man responsible."

Fraschini towered over them. No longer was there terror in his eyes. Something subtler, infinitely more crafty.

"You must be mad to think I will not expose your treasonous plots," he sneered. He turned to Mercelli. "These two men, Campanella and the American, plotted to overthrow the government. The other man"—he pointed to Geoff—"I never saw before, but he is a companion of Carewe. I discovered the conspiracy, phoned headquarters at once. Then I followed them into the depths. They caught me, were going to kill me. While they were debating how pleasant my death should be, they quarreled. Campanella overcame the other two, and boasted that he was going to rule Italy alone as soon as he was rid of all of us."

Clive lay astounded at the smooth treachery of the man.

"He lies!" he cried.

Mercelli turned sardonic eyes upon the prostrate American. "I am certain he tells the truth!"

Geoff said nothing; little things weaved crazily through his brain.

What was Fraschini's reason for accusing them? Then the problem wove into a blinding white pattern.

"I've got it!" he declared triumphantly. "Fraschini is the real traitor, and is trying to cover his tracks! It is true Campanella has been sending the government leaders to their death; he admitted it. But it is Fraschini who has loosed the volcano. I remember now; the passage where he had his suit hidden, and didn't want us to follow him. Search that place, Signor Mercelli, and you will find the proof of all this."

The director's face twisted into insane rage. "You lie, you dog!" he screamed. Swift as light, his knife whipped out of his coat. For the first time, Mercelli's pistol wavered irresolutely; a frown deepened on his forehead as he glanced swiftly from accuser to accused.

Clive knew what was in Fraschini's mind; he intended to strike home before Mercelli could interfere, and silence the man who had said too much.

With a sharp, whispered "Now!" to Carewe, he heaved at his sundered bonds. They gave, and almost simultaneously he jerked upward and forward. Fraschini was lunging for him, glaring his hate. The professor was struggling weakly to his feet.

Mercelli started forward in protest, stopped as he saw the bonds fall from Clive; his pistol came up wildly. The cavern echoed with reverberations; the shot had missed. His finger was squeezing trigger again, but Geoff was off the ground in a crouching leap. Fraschini's knife was swooping downward, when a shrill, piercing whistle froze the wild mêlée to stone.

Forgotten for the moment in the storm of accusation and counter-accusation, Campanella had seized the opportunity to call upon his cohorts for aid.

Fraschini's rage turned to abject terror. "Mother of God," he screamed, "the fire imps!" He swerved from his forward rush in time to avoid Clive's hurtling impact, cast a look of frenzy over his shoulder, and darted, swift as a cat, for the passageway that led to the upper world.

Mercelli lowered his gun, bewildered at his colleague's sudden flight, saw Geoff whirl on his toes, raised it again.

"You fool," Geoff yelled, "run for your life! Look at them coming!"

Mercelli's head shot involuntarily around, saw the ancient vents disgorging their horde of the strange, glassy, red creatures. His jaw dropped, the gun fell nervelessly from his hand. Campanella pointed, not at the astounded trio, but at the tunnel into which Fraschini had darted. The imps swerved in strange discipline, came pattering across the glassy floor.

Clive snapped out of his daze. He jerked Carewe's arm roughly, yelled in the astounded official's ear: "Run for it. Up that way. It's our only chance."

Like arrows from a bow, the three men shot into the tunnel mouth, barely a hundred feet in advance of the red horde. Campanella was shouting something, but what it was they could not hear.

Up, ever up, they sped, as fast as they could in their unwieldy suits, through the gloom-shrouded, twisting tunnel. It was getting hot; perforce they had to stop and clamp their helmets into position, glancing fearfully behind for sounds of the terrible fire imps. Only a faint patter came to them; they were some distance behind.

Without speech they panted up

the tunnel, burst finally into the glowing larger cavern where they had first met Fraschini. Exclamations resounded simultaneously in the three helmets. At the farther end, where the path went upward to the outer world, they saw Fraschini, helmet clamped down, recoiling upon them. The mouth of the upper tunnel was blocked with the glowing bodies of fire imps. They had burried around on a short cut to cut off the humans from safety. Below, the steady patter of feet grew louder and louder. They were trapped!

Fraschini wheeled around to race back, saw the figures of the three men at the mouth of the lower tunnel. A sharp cry of despair came to them in their earphones. Evidently he knew the game was up. He swerved, and darted headlong for the hole in the side wall where he had kept his asbestos suit.

Geoff shouted: "Quick, after him! Head him off! That's where he controls the volcano! He's going to do some mischief!" Geoff dashed ahead, Carewe right on his heels. Mercelli panted behind, sorely bewildered at the swift turn events had taken.

But they were too late. Fraschini was running like a frightened hare. They were fifty paces behind when he dived into the opening. Geoff reached the spot where he had disappeared, looked back a moment, to see Campanella running out of the lower tunnel, a horde of imps at his heels. Then he dived through. Bodies tumbled after him. They found themselves in a tortuous, narrow, dead-black passageway, through which they stumbled, and bumped, and cursed. Fraschini had the start on them, and knew the way.

At length they burst into dazzling light, into a small, irregularly shaped cavern. They stopped short in their tracks, astounded. There was no roof to the chamber, at least so far as they could see. Overhead, seemingly for unfathomable heights, great clouds of steam swirled and eddied, sucking upward, yet always renewed. At the farther end there was no wall, only a curtain of fire, smooth, unbroken, and rippleless. To one side stood an enormous block of black basalt, surmounted by a strange wedge-shaped idol of the same material. Directly at the base, in a thin slot in the stone, there angled outward a long polished rod, also of basalt. Fraschini was standing next the altar, his back to the flaming curtain of fire, his mittened hand resting on the lever. In his unwieldy asbestos suit, with its rounded helmet and unwinking, goggling eyes, he seemed like another idol or demon of the underworld. The flames cast strange shadows on the gleaming helmet.

Clive thrust forward.

"Stop!" Fraschini's voice rang desperately. "One move forward, and I'll blow the volcano and all of us to hell!"

Clive paused uncertainly. Carewe plucked at him. "For God's sake, don't move! The man is insane. He can do it, too." Mercelli stood rooted, speechless. He was out of his depths.

Fraschini heard the professor's whispered warning, gained in boldness. "You're right for once. I'm the boss here; and you'll do as I say. Fools, all of you! You, too, Mercelli! With this lever I control all Italy. Campanella played right into my hands. I followed him weeks ago, found this, and kept quiet. He was killing off the leaders. I loosed Vesuvius, to give the rest of them a taste of what I can do. When I have the nation thoroughly terrorized, I shall offer to

stop the volcano, if they accept me as dictator."

Clive balanced on the balls of his feet, waiting like a hawk for the slightest relaxation of vigilance on Fraschini's part. To distract his attention, he asked, with an effort at casualness: "Just how does that lever work?"

Fraschini fell for the trap. "Simple. I found it here. Some old underground race must have built it, maybe the ancestors of the fire imps themselves. At the top of the slot it is neutral, has no effect. As you pull it farther down, it opens old vents deep down in the volcano. You'll note it's at the halfway mark now. That fiery curtain in the background is the result. It wasn't here when I started this. It was enough to cause the eruption. There is no doubt that if I pull the lever all the way down, it will open every old vent Vesuvius ever had, tap the vast reservoir of internal fires, maybe even the sea. That steam overhead looks as though water is already seeping in. In that case the volcano will go up in one great explosion, and take half of Italy with it—the greatest cataclysm ever seen!"

He did not notice Clive edging gradually forward. Geoff had made up his mind to risk all on one desperate rush, to thrust the director away from the lever. To gain his purpose, he taunted: "You wouldn't dare blow it up. It would be the end of you, too."

"Just try me and see!" the man retorted. "I can't get out, anyway, unless you fools make Campanella call off the imps. Tell him I'll blow him up with the rest of you."

"I'll do that," Clive agreed, and pretended to turn, swinging in a way to gain momentum for the last desperate jump.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Fraschini brought him up sharply, tightening his grip on the lever. Clive teetered on his toes, the other two behind him tensed to join the suicidal spring, when suddenly Geoff relaxed, with an exhalation of breath.

"That's better," jeered the director. "I thought you wouldn't like to go up in fire!"

But Clive had seen something. The rocky wall to the left of the curtain of fire and somewhat behind Fraschini, was bulging out. Greater and greater grew the bulge, until the thinning outer layer, heating to incandescence, resembled a gigantic, iridescent soap bubble. And like a soap bubble, it burst with a soundless plop.

Crowding fire people peered through the burst shell of rock, seemed about to throw themselves forward, when, as if in obedience to some signal from behind, they disappeared.

The three men were rigid in their tracks. Fraschini, with his eyes riveted on Clive, mistook their frozen astonishment for fear. His hand rested significantly on the lever.

"Just a little pressure, and up we go—all of us! Pleasant thought, isn't it?"

But they were not listening. For a figure crept slowly out of the glowing aperture the fire imps had made with their fire-bot bodies. A figure that had hardly anything human left about it. It was clad in an asbestos suit, but the head was uncovered. Clive shuddered. He could hear the gasps of his companion. For the head was charred and smoking, a grinning, seared mask. Only two eyes, bright and glaring, could be seen in that hideous caricature of a face.

Campanella! His helmet had been battered and twisted in that first fight of theirs, could not be affixed

to the asbestos suit. Crawling bareheaded through the superheated passages, following his obedient fire people as they blasted a channel through solid rock, borne up by an indomitable will. His hands were curved in their mittens, as he crept soundlessly in back of the unsuspecting director.

The three men waited breathlessly, silent, immobile; while Fraschini, unsuspecting the creeping doom, kept up his grandiose declamations.

Campanella was almost directly in back of him now. Geoff could hear his heart pounding, could almost hear the heartbeats of his companions. Then the poor, burned caricature of a man straightened up and lunged forward with clutching hands.

Some intuition must have warned Fraschini. For he turned suddenly, saw the leaping apparition, screamed, and thrust up a warding hand. With the other he clamped down hard.

Geoff shouted in warning, shot desperately ahead to grab the lever, reverse it. But it was too late. The curtain of fire bellied forward in an awful, soundless gust; the mountain seemed to crash and tumble down upon them. The last thing he saw was Campanella pulling his enemy back into the flame, a look of terrible triumph on his fleshless face.

Geoff felt himself lifted upward, swirled into great steamy clouds. There was the feeling of racing motion, then the gusty masses changed to black, roaring oblivion.

IT WAS three days later, they told him, when he awoke, to find himself in a hospital bed in Naples. The spotless white beds on either side of him held Carewe and Mercelli, both badly burned, but not so seriously as Clive. That last jump of his had carried him almost into the curtain of fire.

"He blew up Vesuvius," Geoff groaned.

Carewe smiled weakly across to him. "Not quite," he corrected. "The lever didn't work as he thought. It blew up the chamber, all right; but as a matter of fact, so diverted the volcanic fires that Vesuvius stopped erupting. They tell me it is quiet as a ghost now."

Geoff drew a scalded arm across his forehead. "But how did we get out?"

"The chamber was a fumarole," Carewe explained. "That was why it was full of vapor. It opened to the outer crater. When the smash came, we were caught up in the blast of expanded steam, thrust up and out onto the summit. They found us there, unconscious, the soldiers who were searching for Mercelli."

Mercelli leaned over with difficulty, swathed as he was with bandages. He seemed oddly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he said, "for having acted the fool. But I never thought Fraschini was a traitor."

Carewe said kindly: "We know you only did what you conceived to be your duty." Then he added with subtle sarcasm: "Even government supporters have their weaker vessels; nor have they a monopoly on nobility."

Clive raised his weak voice. "I honor Campanella," he said. "A terrorist, true, an assassin, but for a cause he conceived great. When he found Fraschini ready to destroy half Italy, he sacrificed himself, and —what was harder still—his ideals, to prevent it. A man!"

Carewe nodded gravely. Even Mercelli's hand went, half unwillingly, to a characteristic salute.

Like a panther—the sub-human sprang—and the gorilla turned, snarling——

PING-TING

by Charlton L. Edholm

THE DUST-CAKED door carried a brass name plate, "Nikolas Mordoff," and that oblong of polished metal was the only thing about the scabrous barracks that was not moldy, rust-eaten, or falling into decay.

The sinister appearance of Mordoff's house sent a shudder through any one with sensitive nerves. Even the wholesome, light-hearted young fireman, Frank Rawson, felt an odd shiver go through his body as he passed the place.

It was a three-story building, made up of many old residences and

lofts that had been converted into a ramshackle warehouse. The front windows were boarded up or protected by bars. What glass showed in the front was thick with dust, and the paint was blistered and chipped. It had been equipped with old-style, ladderlike fire escapes that were now red with rust. Its sightless windows were like blind old eyes, its weather-beaten front, flaked and scabby by years of scorching sun and the howling gales of winter, was like the skin of a leper.

The rank odor which emanated from the decrepit barracks proclaimed that it was used for housing wild beasts of the jungle, which was borne out by a faded sign: "Nikolas Mordoff, Zoo and Circus Supply House."

Frank Rawson crossed the hot pavement and pulled the bell wire. In one hand he was carrying a fireman's helmet, which he was bringing to Mordoff, partly as a favor, but principally to gratify his curiosity.

For Frank wanted to see the interior of that mysterious jungle den, and the opportunity had come in an unexpected way that morning.

Frank and his friends of Engine Company No. 79—"Dusty" Scutt and "Chuck" Regan—had been sitting in the fire house, chatting and playing checkers, when Nikolas Mordoff approached, dressed in his finest apparel and smiling ingratiatingly as his big paunch bore against the chain across the wide doorway. His florid, red-bearded face regarded the firemen from under a silk hat that was of a quaint, bell-shaped model, but brushed till it shone. A grease-spotted frock coat and once-white vest covered his bay window, while a pair of gray-striped trousers fell in wrinkles like elephant hide to his patent-leather shoes.

Mordoff, the self-styled Napoleon of the animal trade, carried himself like a drum major and looked with contempt on lesser creatures; but toward anything in uniform he had a manner that was even more than respectful. It was almost cringing.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Mordoff. "Will you tell Captain Crawfut I want to speak to him?"

"I'll see if he's busy," answered Dusty Scutt.

"One minute, please! Tell him it's Colonel Nikolas Mordoff, formerly of the Czar's Imperial Guard."

"Oh, we all know who you are," replied Chuck Regan. "God only made one like you."

Mordoff bowed stiffly at what he took for a compliment, and Frank said:

"Here comes Captain Crawfut now. Tell him what's on your mind."

Toby Crawfut, an old-time fire fighter with a certain resemblance to General Custer in his aggressive features and sweeping, gray mustache, scowled at his visitor.

"I come to beg you a great favor, Captain Crawfut," began the visitor. "It is something that is important in my business."

"What business? The monkey house?"

"The wild-animal emporium, begging your pardon. I am taking a photograph to-day of Ping-Ting, the man-ape. It shows him first in the jungle as the missing link, then in a waiter's dress suit; those photos I have already. For the next picture I want to borrow one of your helmets."

"What's that!" roared Captain Toby Crawfut, whose sense of professional dignity was overpowering.

"No offense, captain. I want a photograph of Ping-Ting in a helmet. As a fireman! You know, for a side-show photograph."

"Well, you and your side show can go to blazes!" snorted the choleric Captain Toby. "I'll—I'll——" He glared at the startled Russian as if he were about to commit murder, his eyes spitting fire and his voice choking. Not trusting himself to say more, he turned his back on the intruder and stamped away to his office, banging the door behind him.

The firemen looked at Nikolas Mordoff and broke into laughter at the perplexity on his red and sweating face. The Russian was angry, too. He did not realize that only his political influence with the ward boss had saved him from being kicked out igneminiously by the irascible Toby Crawfut.

"Is this an insult?" demanded Mordoff furiously.

Frank Rawson answered quickly: "It's only the way our old man acts when he's taken by surprise. He don't think very fast, and so he goes to his office and makes up his mind what to say."

"He's not mad at something?"

"Mad? What could he be mad about?" replied Chuck Regan. "Say, ain't it an honor?—your prize apeman wearing a helmet of Engine Company No. 79, and photographed like that for the side shows?"

Mordoff's slow mind was pondering whether this remark was another insult or not, when Frank Rawson spoke up, smiling.

"I'll be glad to oblige you, Colonel Mordoff. When I have a little time off duty I'll step over with a spare helmet."

"Of course, I expect to pay," began the Russian, patting his pocket in a grand gesture. "How much?"

"Not a cent, colonel! Glad to oblige," said Frank, and as Mordoff bowed stiffly and strode away, the young fireman explained: "Fact is, I'm glad to look over the joint. Never can tell when I'll have to go through it in a black fog. Anyhow, I want to give Ping-Ting, the apeman, the up-and-down and see where he is different from old Mordoff."

With a smile at the recollection of the Russian's pompous airs, Frank Rawson jangled the bell of the old warehouse door. Echoes sounded in the bare halls, and Mordoff's voice was heard bellowing an order. Presently a sullen-faced dwarf opened the door and admitted the visitor to a long corridor, thence to a disorderly office, where the owner sat in his shirt sleeves with a weedy little man who was introduced as "our camera artist, Mr. Smike."

The place was in semidarkness, and heavy with dusty cobwebs. Mordoff grunted an invitation: "Have some vodka, my friend?"

"Thanks, no," replied Frank.

"Take some tea, then."

Colonel Mordoff extended a big hairy paw toward a samovar, flanked by half a dozen thick, clouded tumblers, and he leered, showing an array of yellow fangs.

"No, thanks," said Frank, trying to conceal his disgust at the squalor of the place. "Fact is, I've got to get back to the fire house in a few minutes, but I'd like to see your zoo, if you don't mind."

"Why not?" said Mordoff. "I've got some choice exhibits here, Mr. Rawson."

The three proceeded through a dimly lighted main floor that was filled with cages on wheels containing the larger animals. There were a number of old, mangy lions, too

decrepit for any self-respecting circus; some tigers of equal age and frowziness, and several cages of leopards and panthers that glared ferociously through the bars with their green eyes. Farther on were some young lions and tigers that lashed their tails frantically at the sight of strangers, and emitted savage growls and snarls. The smell of the place was overpowering; the noise of the beasts formed a monotonous undertone. It was more like a nightmare than reality.

Smike, the photographer, began to show signs of nervousness.

"Don't get scared!" chuckled Mordoff. "Those are strong cages. They've *got* to be safe. Don't I sleep here myself?"

On the way to the rickety wooden staircase he pointed out the snake den, with its prize specimen, a boa constrictor that was swollen in the middle with a bulbous lump.

"That is Romeo," explained Mordoff. "He has just swallowed one small pig. Now he doesn't eat no more for months."

He was interrupted by a snarl and a booming like a deep drum; then the bars on a stout cage at the farther side of the room were shaken violently. The force of the attack made the floor tremble. The small monkeys scurried into dark corners and chattered in terror.

"There goes Brutus again!" growled Mordoff. "Gentlemen, please don't stop here. That crazy gorilla goes wild when he sees strangers! Barney, you fool, make him behave!"

Barney, the sullen-looking watchman, picked up a long whip from a bench and cracked it. The noise only made the gorilla wilder than ever. The camera artist turned ashy as he broke into a run to get away from the monster that tore at the bars as if he were about to smash the cage to pieces. Even Frank Rawson, who was not easily terrified, was glad to quicken his pace after one sight of the towering, broad-chested black beast, with a face like a bloodthirsty and stubble-bearded pirate.

"Is that cage all right?" asked Rawson, as he reached the staircase to the top floor and cast a look backward.

"Sure. It's a good cage. But that Brutus! He is one Congo devil. I don't trust him. He is a smart one! Some day I think he will undo all the bolts, like a smart burglar."

He turned at the foot of the stairs and hurled back an insulting shout. "Pig! Dirty ape! Wait! Some time I take my gun and shoot your heart out, you black devil!"

With a roar of fury, like a ruffian who understood the taunt and clamored for vengeance, the gorilla hurled his huge form against the bars. Mordoff's florid face turned pale.

"Come along. Don't wait here!" panted the Russian, and in spite of his burden of flesh, ran up the last flight of steps and climbed a ladder to the roof. A strange sight met the eyes of the party.

At the door of a little penthouse sat a frail, blond girl, who was no larger than a child, though she was full-grown. Her body was undeveloped, but her face was wan and sad as if from years of painful experience. She read in a gentle voice from a book, and at her feet, in dog-like humility, crouched a shaggy, deformed figure, that seemed to be only half human. It was clad in tattered garments, like a tramp's. The creature's arms were long and hairy, ending with great hands that seemed capable of breaking a man's back with a single wrench. This

was Mordoff's prize exhibit, Ping-Ting, something more than beast, yet less than man.

But the dark, hairy, and almost animal face was illumined by eyes that were soft, brown, and melancholy. They were like the eyes of a fine collie; the eyes of an intelligent dumb animal that stares at its master, trying to understand human speech.

At the sight of Mordoff, the girl sprang up in alarm, her cotton skirt falling about her body and revealing her immature lines.

"Back to your room, dirty little wench!" roared Mordoff, his bloated features turning purple with rage. His hoarse voice was shaking and charged with murderous frenzy. The veins on his forehead were swollen. He snatched the blacksnake whip from Barney's hand and cracked it like a pistol shot. "As for you, Ping-Ting, you filthy brute! You lump! I'll teach you to hang around my niece!"

Crack! Crack!

The lash curled around the rags that partly covered Ping-Ting's hairy body. Though every touch of the thong raised a red welt, the ape-man crouched there, passively taking his punishment, shielding his eyes with his arms, making no sound of either fear or pain.

This submission only seemed to infuriate Mordoff the more. "Take that, blast you! And that, you devil's spawn!" he roared. "That will teach you to stay away from my Olga!"

Slash, slash, slash! The whip descended again and again on the wretched being that submitted so resignedly to the Russian's brutality.

The door of the penthouse opened wider and Olga looked out, her hands to her thin breast.

"Oh, don't beat Ping-Ting! Please don't hurt him!" she cried in a voice vibrant with terror and pity. "He hasn't done anything wrong! Don't beat him!"

"Silence, wench! Go back to your room! Maybe you want a taste of this!" Again the whip cracked.

"I'll not go back!" she defied him, her voice growing shrill with excitement. "I won't go back. I *won't!*"

Mordoff cracked his whip near the girl's face. "Out you go!" he bellowed. "Don't answer back—I may lose my patience!"

A snarl from Ping-Ting made the big fellow jump. The crouching ape-man bared his teeth, a double row of doglike, white fangs, not resembling anything human. They were only a couple of inches from the Russian's leg. Mordoff jumped away suddenly as if he had been shot and returned the whip to Barney.

With one hand he reached into the deep pocket, where a short-barreled automatic made a square bulge, and fingered the trigger.

"You have been punished enough, Ping-Ting," he said in an altered voice. "Let that be a lesson to you. Now, move! Run over by the fire escape. This gentleman is going to take your picture."

Astonishingly enough, Ping-Ting, who seemed to be no more than a dumb brute, understood every word and obeyed, racing across the roof in a stooping posture, so that his hands touched the gravel as if he were a chimpanzee.

Frank stared at the creature in bewilderment. Ping-Ting was almost as big and powerful as the gorilla, Brutus; certainly strong enough to wring Mordoff's thick neck like a rag. Yet the sub-human acted as if he were a spiritless weakling.

The fireman looked to see how Olga was taking this; but as soon as the girl observed that her strange, monstrous pet was no longer being lashed, she went into her quarters and shut the door behind her.

Ping-Ting stood obediently in the sunlight, one hairy paw on the rail of the fire escape, while Mordoff took the helmet that Frank had brought and fitted it on the creature's head.

Somewhat agitated, the cameraman ducked under the black cloth to focus.

Two exposures were taken. Mordoff returned Frank's helmet with a formal bow and a grunt of thanks; then, scowling at Ping-Ting, he cried: "To the cellar with you, monkey man! From now on, stay away from the roof!"

In swift, agile bounds, the creature ran down the staircase, and before Frank and his companions had reached the ground floor, the ape-man had found a hiding place in some dark corner.

Mordoff insisted on opening a few bottles of beer in the musty office. The cameraman excused himself and left hastily, but Frank accepted, drinking from one of the bottles brought in by a great, bronze-haired woman. The Russian introduced her as Madame Etna, the Human Volcano.

"This little lady is the greatest lion tamer in all the world," he added. "When you see her once in red-and-purple tights in the lion's cage, I assure you, Mr. Rawson, you don't need to see the pyramids or Niagara. She is magnificent! Aren't you, angel?"

Madame Etna bowed a sulky acknowledgment and drained her glass at a gulp.

"Say, what you been beatin' up Ping-Ting for?" she demanded. "He's all over welts. What's the idea?"

"That animal! He's got to keep away from Olga!"

"What are you so fussy about?" she shot back at him. "Who cares?"

"I don't like it. That animal! Why, listen, he talks to the gorilla! Yes, they quarrel like equals, those two animals!"

"No more animal than you are!" snapped the woman, her lips curling in scorn. "Suppose Ping-Ting was picked up as a hairy, freak child in Mongolia somewhere, that don't make him less than human. Of course he was never taught anything, but, Ping-Ting's not altogether a fool. I bet if you'd shave him and dress him up and teach him to read and write he'd make as good a husband for Olga as that cheese-faced chit will ever get for herself."

Mordoff rose up in an outburst of roaring fury. His voice shook the windows, but the woman faced him out contemptuously.

"Don't bellow at me! I'm not scared of you!"

"Don't you dare to insult my niece!" he stormed.

Frank was reluctant to leave this domestic row, but unfortunately his time was up.

"You've got to excuse me," he said. "I'm due at the fire house in five minutes."

Nobody paid any attention to him. The pair confronted each other across the table, their eyes blazing. When Frank reached the street he could still hear the foghorn violence of Mordoff's rage, and above it, the shrill, cutting laugh of the tamer of wild beasts.

IT WAS a week or so later, and the memory of the fantastic wild-beast emporium still haunted Frank Rawson, when the midnight alarm

brought him out of bed and down the fire pole at lightning speed.

Frank had a foreboding from the first stroke of the "jigger" that it was the monkey house that was ablaze, and as Engine Company No. 79 tore through the deserted streets with shrill sirens and clanging gong, Frank knew that he had guessed right.

Already the heavens were red and the sky above the housetops full of dancing sparks. The ancient barracks was burning like a volcano. This fire was going to be a "worker."

Captain Toby Crawfut's pride was to get "first water," make the fire plug before any other engine company, and on this hot July night he had the satisfaction of seeing his boys stretching the hose while the rivals were just beginning to get going. Frank Rawson, "Trigger" Flynn, Dusty Scutt, and Chuck Regan, first to get their lines inside the building, plunged into an interior which resembled a black, howling bedlam. It resounded with screams, roars and bellows of the terrified beasts.

The billowing smoke blinded the men, and only in the far depths could they see a dull glow that told where the lower-most fire was raging. Evidently it had started in the cellar, run up the staircase, and mushroomed. In the upper stories it had made greater headway, and already hook-and-ladder companies were hard at work sending lines in there.

To the firemen's astonishment, they found that already some of the animals' cages had been wheeled out of the arched door on the rear alley. Madame Etna, Barney the watchman, and even the dwarf were struggling through the murk, tugging at cages with the woman's favorite beasts, the young panthers, lions and tigers. Barney seemed half dead with exhaustion, but the magnificent Madame Etna strained at her burden like a horse and did the work of two men.

Frank halted her. "Where is Mordoff? Where is that little niece of his? Are they both out of the building?" he demanded.

She laughed mockingly. "Oh, they're safe enough. Went to a show and supper afterward. They're not home yet."

Frank believed her at first, and felt a great sense of relief that the fragile little girl was safe.

"What about Ping-Ting?" he asked, as Madame Etna bent to her task again.

"Oh, hell! Find him yourself!" she shouted. "I'm trying to save *valuable* lives. What do I care for swine like Mordoff and his so-called niece, and his rival, the ape-man? Let 'em roast!"

The woman's savage answer sent a spasm through Frank's heart. She was madly jealous of the girl, Olga, that was clear. Her jealousy made her hate her former lover. She would like nothing better than to leave them to burn alive.

Then Frank guessed that she had lied to him. He remembered the penthouse where Olga had been reading to the ape-man that day. Perhaps that was the girl's sleeping quarters? If so, and if she had not escaped, he would have to work fast to save her.

Frank quickly turned over the hose to Trigger, Dusty, and Chuck, then ran up to the second floor. From there his way was blocked. The stairway to the roof was out of the question; it was a mass of flames, seething and whirling. He raced down to bring up the hose.

Struggling through the blinding smoke, Frank realized that he was

lost among a complicated system of cages that cumbered the floor. Shrieks, growls, and snarls came from all directions. Searchlights played fitfully through the whirling black murk, and he made for them, trying to avoid stumbling against the bars.

Suddenly his foot slipped on something soft and wet, and he lurched against one of the cages. Instantly a heavy paw shot out; razor-keen claws ripped the sleeve from his rubber coat, and the fetid breath of a lion was hot in his face as the beast roared.

Gasping with horror, Frank leaped back. A fraction of an inch nearer and his arm would have been slashed to ribbons by those steely claws.

Then he saw the glow of a searchlight through a break in the fog, and stumbled toward it.

"That you, Frank? Lend a hand here with the hose," cried Chuck Regan's voice. Dizzy with excitement at the close escape he had just experienced, Frank stooped to raise the heavy, squirming hose that collided with his feet.

The recoil as he grasped it almost floored him. The coil squirmed harder than any hose he had ever handled and the next instant he realized that the object was the huge boa constrictor.

Quick as a flash it whipped a coil around his leg, and Frank let out a yell of horror. "An ax! For God's sake, an ax!"

Out of the murk a fire ax was thrust into his hand, and Frank struggled like a madman to land a blow. It was a tough spot. One slash of the fire ax glancing from that scaly hide would drive deep into his leg. But slash he must, for now it felt as if the coil would soon be crushing his life out.

A flash of light broke through the fog once more. Frank struck full at the spine of the giant snake and was instantly flung to the floor by its maddened contortions. But its strength was going fast. With yells of dismay, the other firemen reached out to jerk him free of the monster, and Chuck Regan snatched up the ax and battered its head to pulp.

Meanwhile, the hose, left to one man, was fighting like a live thing to get away, and they hurled themselves upon it to get a fresh grip.

"Upstairs" gasped Frank. "I think there's a girl up there. The woman said she was out of there, but I'm sure she lied."

His friends understood, and started to drag the hose up the staircase to the second floor. Flames played about the monkey cages, and the smoke was not so dense there.

The sight that met their eyes was fantastic. In the dancing flame light, Ping-Ting was running here and there like a chimpanzee, swiftly opening door after door; and he was doing something that no human being could have done, for the captives seemed to understand the reason for his act and swarmed out of their prisons, fighting their way to the windows, as if Ping-Ting had told them in their own language what to do.

The smaller monkeys were all over the place in a minute, and while the firemen looked on in terror and astonishment, Ping-Ting leaped to the cage of Brutus, the monstrous black gorilla.

Between that pair of sub-human creatures, there was no love lost. At the sight of Ping-Ting, the gorilla tugged at his bars and rattled them furiously, then bared his fangs and gums, showing a set of deadly teeth, capable of crunching through an arm, bone and all, in a single bite.

Ping-Ting recoiled. He crouched there in the firelight, the tatters hanging about his body, and answered the snarls of Brutus with sounds that seemed to be in the same primitive ape language. Frank was certain that, while the great ape and the ape-man stood there, they were hurling insults at each other.

Then a tongue of flame leaped into the gorilla's cage and shriveled the hair on his right arm. With a howl of surrender, Brutus dropped his defiant pose. He was begging for release. Ping-Ting started to undo the bolts that held the cage door, and at that sight the men fled. Abandoning the hose, the firemen raced for the exit, each man clawing, striking and wrenching at a half dozen small monkeys that had leaped upon their heads and shoulders.

"Watch out, for God's sake!" shouted Frank, as he broke from the building and shook off his tormentors. "The gorilla's loose in there! That crazy ape-man unlocked his cage!"

"The gorilla is loose! Get your guns out, boys!" Word was passed to the policemen. They edged closer with drawn revolvers, watching every door and window, ready to send a stream of bullets into the maddened monster the moment it appeared.

But Captain Toby Crawfut, being first and last a fire fighter, wasted little thought on that particular danger. He directed his men curtly to go up the ladder and stretch a line of hose over the roof.

Frank Rawson had not waited for the command. He was already on a ladder raised on the truck, and free of the building. Flames were bursting from the upper windows as he balanced there, playing the nozzle into the heart of the fire. He was watching for a sign of life on the roof. The penthouse was still untouched by the flame. Was it empty, or was Olga inside? Frank was struggling to gain the roof, that was blazing in spots.

Suddenly from behind the penthouse came a rush of figures, with the speed of a racing film.

First was the girl, Olga; close behind her was the hulking Mordoff; and, overtaking them with incredible swiftness, was Brutus, the gigantic black gorilla. How had he reached the roof? By swinging from a top-floor window to the cornice? No matter. He was there!

Before the gorilla could clutch his victims, Frank turned the nozzle, and a jet of water, hard as a bar of polished metal, struck the great ape a staggering blow. A man would have been swept off the burning roof and onto the street, but Brutus gripped with hands and feet, bending under the hammer blows of the water and hanging on stubbornly.

Yet there could be only one ending to the struggle. Against that unchained power of the jetting water, even the gorilla's strength could not endure for long.

Then, under his hand, Frank felt the nozzle sink. The hose grew limp in his grasp. Somewhere down below was a break in the line, or else the supply had been cut off. He yelled: "Water! Water!"—while before his eyes swam a horrible scene of reprisal.

For, as the jet ceased, Brutus leaped at his hated master. One mighty paw snatched at Mordoff's neck. The Russian screamed shrilly, like a stuck pig, but almost instantly the shriek was muffled to a ghastly croak. His life now was a matter of seconds. Brutus darted at the fleshy neck, and all his fangs showed in a grimace of triumph be-

fore he buried them deep in his enemy's throat.

Shameful though his life had been, Mordoff's death paid in full for his brutality. But the fate that awaited the dared girl was even more ghastly than Mordoff's end. Olga had fallen right under the monster's feet. She had fainted. Nothing could save her but a gun-shot, and that quickly.

And Frank Rawson had no gun. Nothing but a fire hose, with the water cut off.

An interruption came from an unexpected quarter. From the shelter of the penthouse leaped another monstrous shape; something smaller than the gorilla, but no less active, perhaps of almost equal strength. It was Ping-Ting.

Like a panther springing at his prey, the sub-human creature shot through the air, claws and teeth reaching.

Brutus had a split second of warning. Carelessly, as one throws away an orange peel, the gorilla tossed the carcass of Mordoff aside. It hung over the cornice of the building, the bearded face and thick arms sagging lifelessly above the street. In the same movement, Brutus received the onslaught of Ping-Ting, and the two enemies, the sub-human and the great ape, met in a crashing impact.

Brutus braced his toes in the masonry and the shock dislodged some bricks from the rotten mortar, causing the gorilla to stagger and shift his position.

That moment was enough to clear the girl from the reach of the brute's claws. Instantly Frank signaled for the ladder to be lowered within reach of the still unconscious Olga. As he extended his arms and seized her, pulling her light body to the safety of the ladder, there was a burst of flame from the section of the roof where Brutus and Ping-Ting were fighting.

The brutes paid no attention to him. Their narrow brains had room for one thought only—to kill each other!

On the sloping edge of a pit like the inferno, the savage brutes wrestled, slashed with their teeth, hammered, clawed and tore at each other's flesh. For only a few seconds they balanced thus, the ape-man and the unreasoning brute, in a battle to the death, a struggle such as first took place in the earliest phase of humanity's conquest of the world, when cave men fought with beasts.

Then the flames swirled up around them like a volcanic eruption. Frank, gripping the ladder with one hand and with the other supporting the unconscious girl, thought he detected one quick glance from the sub-human Ping-Ting. Those eyes, bright and brown as a collie's, fastened for a second on Olga. They were steeped in tragedy, those dog-like eyes; all the sorrow of the world seemed to be in their brown depths.

Then followed a jet of flame that seemed to lick the stars. When the burst of fire had subsided, the place where the brutes had fought was empty; a deep hole, leading down into an inferno.

"The blood-lust was on me, and with fierce blows I was answering it—but now, a second later, I was in my bed, in pajamas!"

Where Four Roads Met

by G. St. John-Loe

A RAIN-SWEPT road going on and on like an endless ribbon across a desolate stretch of countryside. Black clouds overhead, with an occasional gleam of moonlight moving like a pale finger over the wet earth. A raging, shrieking hurricane that tore at every bit of loose clothing and set it flapping violently about me. A sensation of utter bewilderment, as though I had suddenly been projected into a nightmare.

I was puzzled. I couldn't understand where I was or how I came to be there. The rain! The wind! That long deserted road! The more I tried to cope with them, the more confused I became. Groping for an explanation was like groping for a light switch in a perfectly strange dark room.

I kept telling myself that, presently, I should wake up; that it was all a dream, a delusion. But the rain? Surely that was real enough!

And the puddles into which I kept painfully stumbling? The cold that bit into my very bones?

I made an effort to tighten my overcoat—and discovered that it wasn't *my* overcoat at all, but some poor, threadbare garment with only one button and a long rent in the right sleeve. It was completely sodden. I could feel the wet seeping through the shoulders, trickling down my shivering body.

And suddenly I realized that I was hungry—desperately, wolfishly hungry.

How odd! I must have gone to bed without dinner. I must have forgotten. But how ridiculous! I couldn't have gone to bed at all, else how should I be here now, struggling along a pitch-black road of whose whereabouts on the map I hadn't the remotest idea?

I tried to recall my name and who I was, or some incident of the past that might help to clear up the mystery—only to find that my mind was a complete blank.

It was all very strange. Very—well, yes—frightening. I continued to go forward, mechanically, without any sense of direction, as though the actions of my body had nothing to do with my brain. And after a while a confused jumble of impressions began to build up within me, to slide over the screen of consciousness like the flickering shadows of some badly focused film. For a moment I would recall something quite clearly. Then it would elude me—melt back into a kind of general mental chaos. *And every now and then I had the peculiar sensation of remembering two completely different things at one and the same time!*

It was rather like listening to the radio and not being able to tune in properly, getting first one station and then another, and then both at once.

I was completely bewildered.

Ahead of me, where four roads met, shone the lights of a stationary car. A man was standing beside it, scanning the signpost with the aid of a pocket flash. Evidently a stranger to the district who was trying to find his way.

My first feeling was one of immense relief. Here was something human, understandable, a link with the world of reality. I would ask for a lift.

I had begun to hurry eagerly forward, when a sudden, peculiar sensation swept over me. The eagerness faded. Desperation took its place. *I felt that I hated the man, that he was my enemy.*

The two emotions mingled queerly in my brain, like a drop of scarlet dye in a glass of milk. At first the milk predominated. Then, suddenly, the glass was blood-red.

I clenched my hands as I ran on.

He swung round with a jerk to face me. At first I got the impression that he was going to question me, perhaps to ask for directions. Then something about my appearance must have startled him. A look of apprehension flooded his face. He backed hurriedly toward the car, flashing his torch into my eyes as he did so.

His action infuriated me. I advanced threateningly toward him, and began to demand money.

"I'm desperate," I panted. "Desperate! I must have it, you understand? Money!" And I held out my hand, stupidly expectant.

He dropped the torch and turned away for the fraction of a second. And when he faced me again, I saw that he was gripping something in his hand—a heavy, dark object that looked like a wrench.

"Clear out!" he ordered shortly. "D'you hear what I say? Clear out—or it'll be the worse for you!"

In spite of his resolute manner, I heard the note of fear in his voice. I laughed, an ugly, snarling laugh, and sprang forward, seizing his right wrist with my left hand and gripping at his throat with the other.

We fought like beasts, our breath hissing savagely between our teeth, our bodies swaying grimly in the light of the headlights.

I was unarmed, exhausted with hunger and fatigue, but I had no fear of the issue. I was drunk with the convulsive strength of utter desperation.

Suddenly, in an effort to break free, the stranger slipped upon the wet surface of the road and went sprawling backward into the mud. As he fell, his right hand struck the side of the radiator, and the wrench was jerked from his grasp.

It fell into a little puddle of water, and, in a flash, I had snatched it up, flung myself forward upon his prostrate body, and struck again and again at the blurred oval of his face. The wrench was heavy, and the force behind my blows must have been terrific. I felt something hot and wet spurt over my hands, and I knew I had won.

He lay still, his limbs twitching faintly, uttering little whimpering moans that were scarcely distinguishable from the wind.

I knelt beside him, staring down with a curious air of detachment, utterly unmoved by what I saw. He wasn't a pleasant sight. But I felt no pity. It had been his own fault, damn him! If he had given me the money! Even a little. Enough to buy a meal. I hated him. Hated him with the crazy, insensate fury of a madman.

I tore open his raincoat and ran through his pockets, taking only the loose coins and notes I found. His wallet I put back unopened. But, as I did so, I noticed that it bore the initials A. B. C. I wondered, vaguely, what they stood for.

I got up and moved backward, out of the light.

The storm of passion that had possessed me a few moments ago had now completely vanished. I felt curiously calm, utterly detached, moved by no emotion beyond a vague satisfaction that I had got what I wanted.

And then, suddenly, as I stood staring at the long green body of the car, wondering what I ought to do next, a single devastating word crashed into my consciousness and held me rigid.

Murder! I had killed a man—without cause or provocation. I had committed the foulest and most horrible of crimes.

Panic seized me. I turned and ran blindly; ran back, picked up the wrench, and threw it far out over a low hedge into what appeared to be a clump of sprawling bushes.

As I did this I lost my balance, fell backward, and struck my left wrist a stinging blow against one of the fenders.

I sat up, wide awake on the instant, my heart thumping violently, a cold sweat prickling the edges of my scalp. I was breathing quickly, as though I had been running, and there was a sharp pain in my left wrist. My whole body was trembling with fear.

I sprang out of bed and switched on the light.

What had happened? Impossible to believe that I had been dreaming. No dream could have the terrible and shattering reality of the experi-

ence through which I had just passed—a reality more vivid than the room in which I was standing, an experience to which every fiber of my being still echoed like the strings of a dropped fiddle.

By all the normal tests of my senses, I had just killed a man—deliberately and without excuse, at a deserted spot where four roads met. *Yet here I was, alone in my apartment, in pajamas!*

It seemed incredible. Not incredible that I had just committed murder—for every detail of the crime still blazed in my brain like the red streaks of a neon lamp—but incredible that I could be here, at home, safe.

Safe! But was I? Could I be sure?

With a feeling of panic, I stood clinging to the rail at the foot of the bed, trying to think, to separate facts from illusion.

I examined my left wrist, which was still hurting considerably, and discovered that the glass of my watch was broken. Some of the loose pieces had fallen inward, wedging the hands. I noticed that they had stopped at three forty-two.

In a flash I was back again on that desolate country road. I was flinging the wrench into the bushes—crashing my wrist against the car, and——

But that was in the dream!

But the watch?

I raked my hands wildly through my hair. I felt as if I were going mad, as if time and space had ceased to exist—or as if I were the victim of some ghastly, cosmic joke.

Presently it occurred to me that, in the stress of the dream, I must have thrown up my arm and struck my wrist against the bedpost.

I stumbled over and looked at the floor beside the bed. And there, sure enough, was a little sprinkling of shattered glass.

I drew in a deep breath and collapsed into a chair, overwhelmed with relief.

Bit by bit, I began to regain my composure. And, as I did so, I was aware of a peculiar sensation of coming back to myself, which I find very difficult to describe. I kept consciously *asserting* myself, mentally grasping at the familiar objects in my room, as though to prevent myself being drawn back, by some mysterious psychic chord, to an ugly crumpled heap that lay upon a distant roadway.

I took out a cigarette and mixed myself a stiff drink.

Something wrong with my nerves, I told myself. Ridiculous to be so scared and shaken by a dream. And yet, in spite of all my reasoning, the sensation of actual experience lingered on in my senses.

That man's face as I had seen it in the headlights! The look in his eyes as I struck him! The act of throwing away the wrench! My feeling of panic! Could all this, so intensely real to me, be no more than the senseless juggling of a dream?

I swallowed the drink at a gulp and poured myself out another. I smoked several cigarettes and tried to read. And presently I got back into bed again.

I was now quite calm and physically normal, ready to dismiss the whole thing from my mind. Yet every detail of the killing remained starkly clear in my memory. And dimly, somewhere upon the outermost edge of consciousness, there still flickered a vague sense of danger. Flickered for a while, and went out.

Wide-eyed, I stared at the evening paper. Flaring headlines

streamed in heavy type across two columns:

MURDER AT CROSSROADS
Motorist Battered To Death

Inset was a photograph. *That man's face!* (I saw it again in the blazing headlights—the eyes staring with horror, blood streaming from the temples.) And under the photograph, a name. Albert Bradly Carter. A. B. C. *The initials on the wallet!*

Horrified, I glanced through the sensational news story, grasping only the most essential phrases.

"—shocking discovery shortly after five o'clock this morning at Four-Ways, near Langhurst, Kent—— Battered to death—— Long green car—— Mr. Alfred Bradly Carter—— Evidently a desperate struggle—— Right hand cut and bruised—— Wrist watch broken and stopped—— Fixes the exact time of the murder at three forty this morning. Impossible to say yet with what weapon he was killed—— Early arrest of murderer expected——"

Then it was true, after all?

Conviction, as ghastly as it was inexplicable, crashed over me. My whole body went deathly cold. Somehow, I had done this thing. Somewhere in the cold and darkness of the previous night, I had knelt upon a man's prostrate body and battered the life out of him. I was a murderer!

But Four-Ways? I had never been there in my life. And last night I was fifty miles away. Yet the man was dead—just as I had known! He had been killed at three forty in the morning. His broken watch proved that. It must have stopped when his hand crashed against the radiator. But at three forty-two I had wakened in my own flat, in bed! When I slipped on the roadway and fell against the car—— That would be about two minutes later, of course.

But this was absurd. I had broken my watch against the bedpost at the moment of waking. That was clear enough from the splintered glass on the floor of my room.

I glanced again at the newspaper report. "Impossible to say yet with what weapon he was killed." The wrench, of course. But they hadn't found it yet. It was lying in the field, among those bushes.

I felt stunned. What was I to do? Go to the police and tell them the whole crazy story? Show them my bruised wrist? My broken watch? Tell them about the wrench? And expect them to believe that it had all been a dream?

I pressed my hands over my eyes, trying to think, to rid my brain of the horror that clung to it like some poisonous vapor.

I hadn't really been at Four-Ways last night. But could I prove that? Prove that I was actually at home at the time of the murder? There had been no one but myself in the apartment. So far as I could remember, no one had seen me come in. There couldn't be any real evidence against me. But I knew about that wrench! Apparently I was the only person who did. It was a clew—perhaps a vital one. There might be finger prints on it! They might be my own! But that was impossible! Ridiculous! A nightmare of monstrous absurdity! But could one be sure where nightmare ended and reality began?

I paced wildly up and down my room, aware of a desperate sensation of danger. I was trapped like some helpless beast in a deadly network of uncanny and inexplicable

circumstances. I was horribly afraid.

And suddenly, with the courage of desperation, I made up my mind what I would do. I would go and tell them my story now, freely and frankly. Get to the bottom of the whole crazy business.

The inspector glanced up from his desk as I entered, tipped back his chair, and regarded me with an air of mild inquiry. Then, as he continued to stare at me, his expression changed to one of startled amazement. He sucked in a quick breath and bent forward.

"You want to see me about something?"

"Yes. The Four-Ways murder."

"Well?"

His hand moved surreptitiously along the edge of the desk, as though in quest of something—a hidden bell, for instance—and with a feeling of panic, I plunged recklessly into my story.

"It's about the Four-Ways murder. There's something I want to tell you—to explain——"

"Yes?"

"About the wrench."

"Wrench?"

He leaned forward still farther, watching me intently. His lower lip protruded and sucked at the upper in a peculiarly unpleasant and disconcerting manner. And suddenly a door upon my left opened smartly, and two policemen came into the room. I took a hurried glance at them, and went on wildly:

"It's in some bushes. I threw it over the hedge into a field. At least, I mean, the man who killed him did. I came to tell you——"

"I see." The inspector nodded. "Want to confess, eh?"

"*Confess!* Good God, no!" My voice rose hysterically. "I want to tell you—to explain! It's all so confused. You see, last night——"

I broke off, wondering how to present what I had to say in a reasonable form. And while I hesitated, a telephone rang sharply from a bracket on the wall.

The inspector went over to it, placed the receiver to his ear, and listened intently for a few moments. Then, with a curt reply, he set the instrument back on its rest, strolled back, and stood facing me. There was a look of intense satisfaction in the depths of his brown eyes as he said:

"You'll be interested to hear that they've just found the wrench—in some bushes, as you say." He warned me that anything I said would be taken down in writing and might be used in evidence against me, and added: "Now, let's have the rest of the story."

I glanced desperately round—at the bare walls, the one smallish window, high up, the three pairs of watching eyes. The idea of a dream receded, became remote, incredible, utterly absurd. I clenched my hands until the nails dug into my palms.

"Listen!" I began. "You must believe me. You *must*. I don't know anything about it. At least—not *really*. I mean—I wasn't there. I was at home, in bed."

"Oh?" The sucking lips curled unpleasantly. "Then how d'you know about the wrench? Besides, we've got your description all right. We'd have had you in a few hours, anyway."

Got my description? My heart seemed to stop beating and turn sickeningly over in my body. I was trapped. I had been mad to come here.

"But I tell you, I was at home—in my own apartment," I insisted. "I'd been dreaming, and——"

"Dreaming!" He laughed derisively, sat back on the edge of the desk, and folded his arms. "Now, listen here, Mr.—er—whatever your name is. I mean to have the truth. All of it! And I wouldn't waste time, if I were you. See?"

The events of the next hour will remain branded forever in my memory—a phantasmagoria of mental torture too horrible to dwell upon, too confused for adequate description.

I know now what a hunted animal feels like, a fox panting and exhausted, with a pack of yelping hounds on her heels; a rat caught in the steel grip of a trap.

Again and again I repeated the whole crazy story—about the dream, about waking suddenly in my apartment in the middle of the night. I showed my bruised wrist, my broken watch. I explained who I was and where I lived. I protested my innocence. I grew excited, incoherent, frantic. And all the while I could see that not one of the three men believed a word I said. Sometimes I caught the inspector looking at me as though he thought I had gone mad. And, indeed, I began to doubt my own sanity.

Finally, when I was on the point of collapse from sheer emotional exhaustion, there was a knock upon the door, and another officer came into the room. He coughed, gave me a fleeting, curious stare, and addressed the inspector, who was frowning up at him impatiently.

"The Four-Ways murderer. We've got him, sir. Bringing him in now."

"*What?*" The inspector sprang to his feet, overturning a chair as he did so. He looked as though some one had struck him a sharp blow across the face. His mouth hung open stupidly. "*The Four-Ways murderer?* Must be some mistake! We've got him here!"

The officer shrugged, jerked his head backward over his shoulder, and moved away from the door.

There was a scuffling in the passage outside, and a moment later a group of men came forward into the room—a group of men surrounding a central figure whose appearance sent a shiver of uncanny horror over my whole body.

In spite of his wild and disheveled appearance, the unshaven chin, the bruised and bleeding cheek, *I realized that he was an exact replica of myself.* The same black hair growing in a pronounced peak on the forehead, the same deep, peculiarly light-gray eyes, the same thin-lipped mouth, the same jutting line of jaw.

He was wearing a shabby brown overcoat with only one button and a long rent in the right sleeve—*the one I had worn in the dream.* His left wrist was roughly bandaged under the handcuffs.

I sprang to my feet with a stifled cry, stood swaying dizzily, while the room seemed to revolve slowly around me. There was a burst of excited talk. A sound like the sound of rushing water—— My knees sagged. I felt deadly faint—— Then, like a curtain falling, the walls closed about me.

"Sure you're all right now?"

The police doctor stared at me anxiously. I nodded, and glanced vaguely about me.

We were alone together. At first, I couldn't think where I was or what had happened. Then, suddenly, it all came rushing back. I shivered. An icy sensation ran prickling over my flesh. A confused, burring noise was in my ears.

I drew in a deep breath, and tried to pull myself together.

"I—er—sorry to be such a nuisance," I apologized. "It's shaken me up a bit."

"No wonder. A most extraordinary occurrence. Most extraordinary. Kind of dual identity."

He regarded me with an air of intense interest, and went off into a rambling hypothesis of the probable explanation of the uncanny experience through which I had just passed, relating a somewhat similar incident that had come under his notice some years before in Munich.

"Apparently it is possible," he said, "for two human beings to be so closely attuned to the same rate of psychic vibration that each is capable—under exceptional circumstances—of exercising a strong emotional pull over the other. Usually the phenomena is observed only between people who are very closely related, or very much in contact—like twins, for instance. But—well, your own case seems to demonstrate that it is also possible—though, fortunately, extremely rare—between total strangers."

He broke off, pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment, and went on: "This man was going through an unusually violent experience—and you were asleep, in a peculiar state of receptivity. He sent out his unconscious 'call.' You picked it up——"

He leaned forward, and laid his hand upon my arm. His expression became exceedingly grave as he concluded:

"I understand that he's confessed. He'll swing for it, without a doubt. When he does—see that you're not alone, and especially that you're not asleep."

Gondwana Land

STUDIES at the University of Michigan indicate that South America may not have once been connected with the antarctic continent by prehistoric land bridges. Some recent theories indicate that such a land link, over the now-existent seven-hundred-mile stretch of ocean, might once have been a part of Gondwana Land.

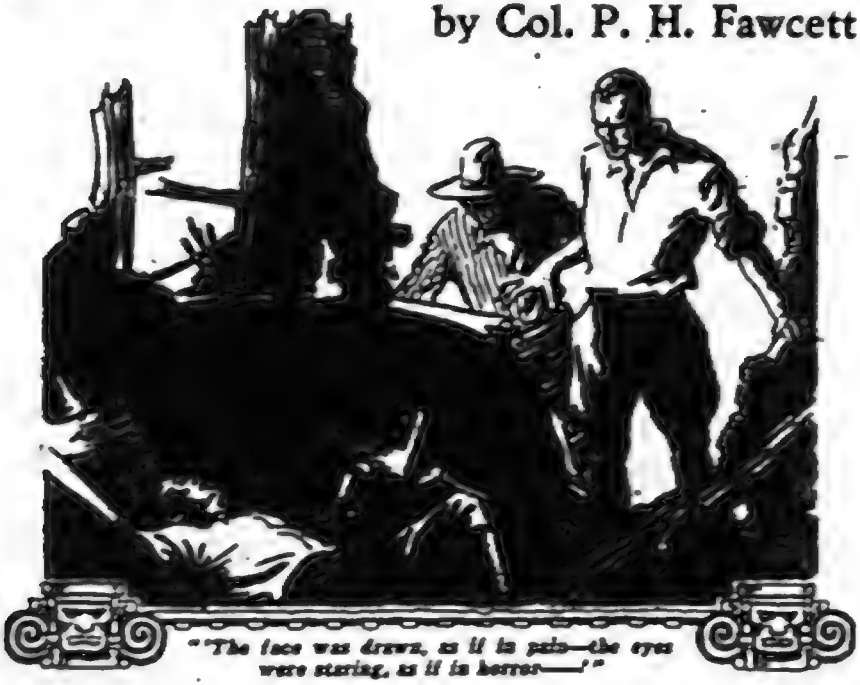
Some rocks brought back from Antarctica by Doctor Laurence Gould, geologist and second in command of the Byrd expedition, have been examined by Doctor Duncan Stewart of the university. Microscopically and chemically, Stewart has been unable to find resemblances between the rock formations of the two areas.

The rocks, taken from the Rockefeller Mountains in King Edward VII Land, have a high content of the alkali elements, sodium and potassium, while the rocks from the Andes Mountains in South America are high in calcium, magnesium and iron.

As exploration progresses, a more conclusive answer to the problem may be expected. The ice and snow-covered land has hitherto retarded anything but mere geographical discovery.

Callahuaya's Curse

by Col. P. H. Fawcett



"The face was drawn, as if in pain—the eyes were staring, as if in horror——!"

This hitherto unpublished tale, which came to light only recently, was written by the famed British explorer whose fate is a great mystery of its decade.

In May, 1925, Colonel Fawcett, a Founders' Medalist of the Royal Geographical Society, and the hero of numerous far-flung adventures, in company with his eldest son, Jack, and one attendant, set out to explore the vast, uncharted hinterland of Brazil, where Fawcett believed that the remains of an ancient civilization were to be found. To this day the party has never been heard from.

In 1928, Commander G. M. Dyott brought back a circumstantial report of the massacre of the entire party by savages, but this was discredited by Colonel Fawcett's wife and close friends, who, in spite of everything, remain confident that the explorer is alive, presumably a prisoner in the hands of Indians.

Justifying this, in March, 1932, a Swiss trapper in Brazil, Stefan Rattin, announced that he had encountered a white man whom he believed to be Fawcett, held captive by Indians in the region of the Amazon; and he went back to attempt the rescue of the white prisoner.

But a year has passed now, and no word has come from Rattin. The silence thus is only deepened over the lost colonel.

THE SENOR will pardon me, but it is better to sleep in the *tambo*. This place has an evil reputation."

We had arrived toward sundown at the small Indian village of Yani on the trail from Sorata to Mapiri over the Bolivian Andes.

I had swung my hammock across the corner of a half-ruined house adjoining the *tambo*, because it happened to offer facilities of privacy and some sort of shelter, and I had sought out the *corregidor*, or local headman, to secure fowls and eggs. This individual proved to be a Spanish Bolivian with a strong dash of Indian, intelligent, and apparently about thirty years of age, although among these people appearances are deceptive. After a successful deal, he had returned with me to the *tambo*, and on passing the ruined house, stared with marked concern at my hammock.

"The señor will pardon me, but it is better to sleep in the *tambo*. This place has an evil reputation."

I laughed and demanded an explanation, rather challengingly; but he sedately and stolidly stuck to his story.

"This place has an evil spirit," he repeated, with such a note of warning that I saw that unless I shifted the hammock, my fate would be direful and on my own hands. So I broke camp and moved back to the *tambo*.

But when the sun settled behind the mountains and the air grew cold and the others turned in after dinner, I strolled along to the *corregidor's* house, carrying a bottle of Jamaica rum, calculated to make men talk.

The abode was rude enough, stone walls and mud floor, two or three pots in a blackened alcove, a plank bed with an untidy heap of blankets of native manufacture, a muzzle-loading gun, two hide-covered boxes ornamented with brass nails, a heap of potatoes and dusty sacks in a corner. From a peg driven between two stones hung a saddle heavy with trappings, and from the beams were suspended several dried sheep. One rough chair covered with hide stood before a solid-looking table on which two candles guttered, jammed into empty beer bottles. I was honored with the chair, and to accommodate himself the host drew one of the ornamented boxes up to the other side of the table.

"Not a great abode, but the señor is welcome. To the health of the señor!" The *corregidor* lost some of his taciturnity in these home surroundings. "It is not often that a gringo has condescended to honor this poor house," he remarked with satisfaction. He examined the bottle, which I placed on the table. "Cane juice, or Jamaica? Ah! Better than our *kachasa*, yes? The señor knows our *kachasa*?"

I admitted acquaintance with the species of poison to which he referred. He fairly jumped up and down on his box, expostulating against the injustice of my description.

"*Kachasa* keeps off the fever," he excitedly explained. Then, with that wide somberness of Indian eyes and the muted minor tone of resignation: "Life is hard, and we are poor in these mountains, and what have we got but the cocoa and the *kachasa*?"

I asked how many Indians lived thereabout, and he said that many lived in the valleys.

"Some work on the *fincas* of *patrones*, others on their own lands, but how they manage that, *Dios* alone knows. Yet there is always gold, and gold buys *kachasa*, but the

Indians will not tell where they find the gold. They still, in their hearts, venerate the Inca, and in the mountains they have their chiefs and their secret gatherings; not all the padres in Peru and Bolivia together can stop the Indians from worshipping the sun. They say the Inca will return some day and demand his gold, and they guard it. The señor will take coffee?"

I said I would. "It is good, this coffee of the mountains," I said, and he turned for a moment away from the magnificently filthy pot in which he was preparing the hot drink.

"It costs much to bring out," he said sorrowfully. "And lower down, señor, the *cascavel* is so numerous that in many places the people will not pick the berry, and the plantations have been swallowed up by the *montaña*."

I asked how long he had been in this place, Yani, and he said: "Not so long as some. My father came here to work the gold for the company, the gringo company, and business was good, for a time. Eh, yes. For a time."

Pouring the steaming coffee into thick white cups, the *corregidor* shrugged those muscular shoulders of his. The flickering murkiness of the candles spun mysteries around his eyes, bottomless and black with the enigma of his nature. He set a steaming cup before me.

"*Tiene razon!*" he approved. "This rum of Jamaica is good with the coffee!"

"Good," I agreed. Outside, the stillness of the night was only deepened by the soft stamping of the mules in their corral. In the shack the candles burned with hypnotic steadiness, auras of golden luminence, with rays stringing like spider webs through the motionless, chilly darkness, relieved otherwise only by the red glow of the fire in the alcove.

"Yes," grunted the *corregidor* musingly, "business was good for a time. For a time. But the Callahuaya—— Eh, well, a gringo perhaps would not believe it. But we of the mountains see many curious things which we cannot explain."

I maintained diplomatic silence while he sipped coffee, and I was rewarded when he went on:

"It was thirty years ago, señor, that my father came here to work for the company, when all those ruined walls out yonder were houses and in them were many people living happily. Gringo engineers directed the work in the mines—in the morning the señor shall see the piles of stone. In the ruined house where the señor so ill-advisedly wished to sleep, there dwelt the *capitaz* of the Indian workers, an honest man, señor, and a strong man. No one knew whence he had come, but people said he had in him the blood of the Indian and of the Spaniard as well. He was a hard man, silent, and dark. Some said that he had killed men in the South. With him he had a woman and a child, and the woman had come from the village of the Callahuayas. It is twenty miles to the north, near Pelechuco.

"The señor knows the Callahuayas? Señor, they are in league with the devil. They know the secrets of herbs and can cure sick mules as can no other people. It is a bold man who offends a Callahuaya, señor. Their curse is terrible. The future is an open book to them. It is true that the woman was not herself a Callahuaya. But she had lived with them. She was fair-skinned, like the gringos, and equally full of pride—yet the Callahuayas loved her.

"The golden ornaments that she wore made her good to look at. But she was faithful to the man, and if she looked at other men and liked to see the hot blood in their eyes, it was with no evil intent, but as all women will who can. She had one child, a daughter, fair as herself, which was strange, for the man was a *mestizo*, and dark. People said she was of the royal blood of the Incas. And it is true that the Indians treated her with great respect."

"Now and again," the *corregidor* continued, "an aged and venerable Callahuaya would come over the mountains and stay in the house. Some said that he came to get stolen gold. Others said that he was the father of the woman. No one spoke to him, because all were afraid of the power of a Callahuaya, and dreaded a Callahuaya's curse.

"It was perhaps twenty years ago that there was trouble for the government in the region they call Challana. Its people were Indians of the Yungas, and certain others who had escaped the law, and they refused to pay taxes or to allow the government officials to enter their lands; and so troops were sent to enforce the imposts.

"It thus happened that a regiment, on the march to Mapiri from Sorata, halted for some days here at this village, and the officers were entertained by the gringo engineers, and there was much feasting and drinking.

"And the colonel of this visiting regiment was half Indian, a most ugly and boastful man, and he fastened his eyes upon the woman who lived in the house with the *capitaz*.

"I do not know if that is why the colonel remained so long, but I know that such officers are ever gallant in love and have little scruple in securing their ends; and the colonel of a regiment may do as he will and no one dares oppose. There are many tales—— I tell the story only as my father told it to me; I was very young at the time.

"One evening the colonel was drunk, and he boldly sent the soldiers to the house to fetch the woman. They found the door barred. The man knew the ways of these soldiers, and he called out that he would kill the soldier who dared to enter. But the soldiers only sent for more of their comrades, and they broke down the door and seized the man. And after they gave him six hundred lashes they threw him into the calaboose. *Si, señor*, the gringos protested. But what could they do? That colonel, that devil, he had many armed men. He would have lashed all the gringos. So he beat the man, and threw him into the calaboose.

"Yet, señor, in the morning, the dead bodies of the woman and of the colonel were found on the floor of the house. And the calaboose was empty, and the child gone. No one has seen the child since, or the man. There was a great fuss. The soldiers destroyed many houses. But finally the regiment marched away, and those of it who escaped the *tertiana* were massacred in the forest of Challana. A curse was on the regiment.

"The Indians say that a curse had been placed upon the mine as well as upon the regiment. And it seemed so, for soon after this the mine was closed, for the reason that the Indians would no longer work for the company, although there was still much gold. The señor may see in the morning how the works end suddenly and without apparent reason.

"But that is not all. I myself, who saw the colonel dead upon the floor of the man's house—I also saw the thing that happened later. I have been *corregidor* since my father died many years ago, and there are others here who know that what I tell is true.

"It was only a few years ago that two officers came here from the Beni. Both were suffering from the beginnings of that disease of the *montaña* called *beri-beri*, walking with a certain difficulty. Now, at that time the house was as the señor has seen it, a ruin, with neither doors nor windows, and with much of the roof fallen in; for it had never been inhabited since the tragedy of that night, and much of the woodwork had been carried away and put into other buildings.

"Well, I visited the two officers, señor, as was my duty, seeing to their mules. They had arrived late here at this village; the trail was as difficult then as now, with many *cuestas*. But I heard later what happened just as they came into the place and dismounted at the *tambo*.

"And it was a strange thing.

"That same house without doors or windows which you saw, señor, they saw, beside the *tambo*—but they saw that the house was lighted from within. And more than this: they saw an Indian girl standing at the door, twisting thread in her hands. She was beautiful, and had many golden ornaments.

"Officers are usually of a sort, señor. These two tossed a coin to decide which should court the maiden. And the loser came to my house for company and *kachasa*, and contented himself with talk of the miseries of the Beni and those farther rivers, which every one so dreads to visit. He told me nothing of his companion, whom I naturally supposed to have been tired and to have gone to sleep. It grew late, and the officer slept here on the bed in the corner, while I lay on blankets on the floor.

"When I opened the door next morning, the sun was shining up the valley. I awakened the officer for coffee, and together we walked to the *tambo*.

"And, señor, outside the old house the officer stopped and stared, and he cried out: 'Why, what is this? Last night this house was no ruin! Last night there was a door here, and it stood open, and a light was inside, and a *chola!*'

"Señor, the officer went and looked in at the broken wall, and I heard the hoarse cry in his throat, and I ran to him.

"On the mud floor amongst the fallen tiles and rubbish, stretched out exactly where I had seen the body of the colonel many years before, lay the other officer—dead. The face was drawn, as if in fear or pain, the eyes were open and staring, as if in horror—and the officer was dead.

"Eh, señor, I do not understand these things. It may have been one of those strange diseases of the Beni, the *beri-beri-galopanti*, such as take men suddenly and without warning. I do not know.

"We carried the body to Sorata, a difficult burden, and there the good priest buried it. I told him, señor, what I have told you, but he bade me keep silent about it. And that is all I know of the thing, señor. But the ways of the Callahuayas are the ways of the devil, and there be many things which it is not good for plain folk to understand, and with which it is better for us not to meddle.

"It is better, señor, to sleep in the *tambo*.

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